

GEORGE LANSBURY  
MY FATHER

*By*  
EDGAR LANSBURY

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## FOREWORD

THE reader will see that I have not tried to write a biography. Father has already written one autobiography (from which I have quoted freely) and in the fulness of time may write another. I have not mentioned the *Daily Herald*, for he himself has written "The miracle of Fleet Street," and has said all there is to say about a period in the life of the *Daily Herald*, and of his own, when miracles did seem to happen.

There is quite a lot in these pages about myself and less (though still a lot) about my brothers and sisters. I excuse this on the ground that by talking of us I may have revealed part of father's life and personality which might otherwise have remained obscure. Those who know as much about his public work as I do, or more, may know little or nothing about his early domestic life, his recreations, his frailties, and his reactions to the irritations and anxieties of a father and husband. It may be asked, why trouble to enlighten them? That would certainly be a poser. I was asked to do it, and now that the work is done I am glad I was asked. I have greatly enjoyed raking up the past and can only hope that the reader will share my enjoyment. I hope, too, that nothing I have written will give pain or

annoyance to those whose memories or susceptibilities may have been stirred or jarred by the rake.

Eighteen months ago father knew that I had started writing this book. If I understood his silences aright he was pleased and sceptical at the same time. He never opposed the idea and even lent me some letters and papers from which I have quoted. Nor did he ever ask to see the MS. or evince any anxiety as to what I might write.

He will be surprised but I hope not shocked by my recollections and impressions of some aspects of our family life in the 'nineties. I myself was shocked when I recalled them. As a family we were reasonably well-fed and comfortable after the year 1900, and if I have painted the picture of our domestic affairs in colours too sombre, it is because the last thirteen years of the nineteenth century made the deeper impression on my own life and character. They at least were years of hardship and penury, of yearning and hope deferred, and of minor wishes unfulfilled. This after all is a book of my impressions.

If the chapters of the book are ill-defined and the style discursory, it is because, although one may read of chapters of life being opened or closed, they never are. The thoughts and ideals of yesterday are constantly obtruding themselves to confuse the issues of to-day.

It is said that a prophet is not without honour save in his own country; I hope I have shown not only that father is not without honour in his own



country, but that he is not without honour even among his own children.

My thanks are due to Constable and Company for permission to quote extensively from *My Life*, by George Lansbury; to the Editors of *The Evening News*, the *Star*, *Time and Tide*, *The Sunday Express* and the *Week End Review* for permission to quote from their columns; to many whose letters I have used; to mother, who, had she not died too soon, might have proved herself the only kind critic of my effort; and to my father for providing,

- (a) A subject to write about, and
- (b) the writer.

EDGAR LANSBURY.

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## INTRODUCTORY

WHATEVER George Lansbury's reactions may be in the company of statesmen, philosophers and divines, there is no mistaking his feelings in the company of those whom he refers to as "the common people". For him "the common people" are coalmen, dustmen, porters, postmen, navvies, bricklayers, clerks, sailors, soldiers, shopkeepers, grocers, engineers, carmen, chauffeurs, the unemployed, and their wives. Company directors, stockbrokers, statesmen, archbishops, and experts in general may be common, but they are not the common people.

If you saw George Lansbury in the tube or on a bus, or just walking along the road one morning, and felt inclined to talk, you would start right away without bothering about an introduction. You might open with "Hullo, George," and it's ten to one his response would be "Hullo brother", how's the war?" (quite irrevelant to any war in particular yet subtly relevant to affairs in general). Or if it suited your style (and it would if you were a politically minded workman) you might venture: "How goes it, George, you didn't half give old Churchill a caning last night!"

Such openings as these or any others even remotely indicating a knowledge of or interest in public affairs would serve to establish a friendship that would last until he got off the bus, out of the tube, or arrived at the barber's shop or the House of Commons or wherever it was he was going to. He would open his heart and his mind and boom out his ideas with enthusiasm and sincerity whether your subject was politics, the dole, Gandhi, de Valera, the leg-theory, anti-vaccination, your wife's bad temper, the Loch Ness Monster, or the vague obsessions and apprehensions of humanity at large. If you wanted to do the talking yourself you would find him a grateful listener, eager to learn your ideas and opinions, and able to see your view of the picture almost as clearly as you do yourself.

But at times you might detect a too thoughtful look beneath those rugged brows indicating a mind apt to go on with its own business when conversation lacks sincerity or becomes boring. Beware of such moments, for father is one of those rare and gifted people, positively cut out for all-night sittings of the mother of parliaments, who can get in a nap between stations on the Underground, and make an intelligent study of the advertisements at the stations on the way. So if you must do the talking let it be of the kind that will keep a live man awake.

In common with the very rich and the very poor he has never mastered the art of shaving himself. Any morning he may be seen quietly taking his way along the Bow Road to one of the local "barber-

shops" where the common people are shaven and shorn and the illusion kept up that separate mugs, soaps, and brushes are reserved for the lordly ones who are willing to pay an extra halfpenny for the privilege. In the summer he may make the journey in his bedroom slippers. Be assured that it was not father who stipulated for the separate mug and soap and brush. It would be the barber himself who, with proper respect for the dignity of his client, would have pretended to make the arrangements.

But away from home father takes his turn (and pot luck) at the nearest barber's shop, where the proprietor may be an artist or a navvy at his trade but whose irrevocable strokes help to form those facial characteristics to which caricaturists such as Low and Strube owe so much. In Dr. Johnson's day political discussions used to centre in the coffee shops. To-day, they centre in the barbers' shops where the talk will be keen if not elevating. There the presiding genius (wise as Mr. Speaker though not so silent), with snapping of scissors and rasping of blades, will maintain an uncertain impartiality during debates in which the leader of His Majesty's Opposition may sit facing, not the Government Benches, but those who work at the bench, who for the moment would be waiting to take their turn in the sacrificial chair.

## II

### AN ENIGMA

FATHER is loved much and hated much. In the eyes of hundreds of thousands he is a saint; in the eyes of many he is just a dangerous fire-brand. Mr. Baumann, a gallantly flickering torch of Victorian Toryism, writing in the *Evening Standard*, describes him as the "Poplar pantaloons—not worth anybody's powder and shot"; while Hamilton Fyfe (one time War Correspondent and Imperialist, but latterly pacifist and editor of the *Daily Herald*) writes:

If out of the present disorder and injustice there does arise a saner, kindlier relation between men, then he (George Lansbury) will be remembered and honoured as the Saint who showed the way to it and the Christian hero who helped to lay its foundations, though not always in a patient or very practical way."

Of course one can't be patient and practical and a saint at the same time, as Hamilton Fyfe ought to have known. The Editor of the *Week End Review*, whom father would probably class with the experts wrote:

He is one of those who give an air of hopeless amateurishness and then proceed to handle affairs with surprising

skill. He was an unexpected success as a Cabinet Minister, has led the Labour handful well in the House, and will tactfully hold together the various Labour factions in the country.

Father never stops to ask himself whether he is a saint or a sinner, a fool or a genius. Nor does he worry about the sort of figure he will cut as the result of speech or action. So long as both are in accord with conscience nothing else matters. Had this not been so, you could never have discovered him, in 1932, leader of a party which numbers far more atheists and agnostics than Christians, writing a long and passionate letter to *The Times*, calling upon all "who call themselves Christians and really want to do the will of Christ" to unite in a great crusade with the object of achieving by "effort and prayer" a solution of the problem of "preventable misery and destitution". It was obvious that the majority of his own party would look with disfavour upon an attempt to enlist the Church of England in such a crusade. To them, whatever they may think of the teachings of the founder of christianity, the Church of England itself stands for privilege and monopoly, riches and power. Besides, apart from questions of religion, it is unfashionable nowadays and almost bad taste for a Socialist to let it be known that he is moved by humanitarian considerations. To confess oneself unhappy because of the squalor of the slums or the miseries of the unemployed is almost indecent. One must have the scientific outlook, study Karl Marx, and join the increasing



band of brothers who spend their lives carving one another's theories to pieces. Alas that Socialist experts should be as futile as most other experts! Fortunately, we want none of them.

On the other hand there were the hosts of the Church led by the Bishop of Durham. It was not clear to father why so eminent a follower of the lowly Nazarene should recommend to the hungry miners of Northumberland and Durham the virtues of patience and christian resignation as satisfaction for their material needs; yet this is exactly what he did, in a most scholarly way, calling upon them to note the distress of the rich who were closing down country-houses and discharging servants because of the heavy burden of taxation.

There was more wisdom in father's call "for effort and prayer" than his critics could grasp. He is not such a fool as to expect God to step down from some incredible throne and sweep away unemployment and destitution just because a few thousand Christians beseeched Him to do so. What he expected was that "those who call themselves Christians" would put the efficiency of prayer to a real test. In his own case he had found that prayer resulted in a clarifying and purifying of his mind so that his course seemed straighter and clearer and his efforts more fruitful. Prayer for him was not a matter of asking favours. I am sure he has never prayed *for* anything or anybody. I have known him to be questioned at meetings by agnostics and socialists as to what good prayer or Christianity could do for

the working classes. And always his answer had been "I don't know what good it can do them; I know that for me prayer is an inspiration and that it leads to work and renewed effort." Clearly if one doesn't like work and effort one had better not pray. I think the terms "meditation" and "self-examination" might fitly describe what father calls "prayer".

His call to Christians was inspired, not by the belief that their voices would reach the ear of God, but by the knowledge that if "those who called themselves Christians" prayed sincerely, they might themselves discover the will and the power to move mountains of ignorance and misunderstanding concerning the causes of "unemployment and preventable destitution".

### III

#### EARLY DAYS—AND LATER DAYS

GEORGE LANSBURY is an absolute teetotaller and has always been one; this means that never in his life has he tasted beer, whisky or wine. His best friends, however, would be the first to agree that he drinks to excess, and he would probably admit it himself. His drink is tea. He likes it as other men like beer. He drinks it from early morning till late at night, and when all-night sittings are on, he drinks it whenever he is thirsty. Nevertheless, he is just as much down on teetotallers who drink to excess (including himself) as he is on the ordinary drunkard. During a debate on the Licensing Laws he declared that all non-alcoholic beverages were poison. "For myself," he said, "I believe in one drink only—the lion's drink—water."

George Lansbury and Bessie Brine were the leading spirits in the Whitechapel Band of Hope in the days when Whitechapel was peopled by the Irish and the Jews were only a distant menace. Between them they superintended the Sunday School attached to Whitechapel Church, she playing the organ and he no doubt announcing the hymns and thumping the desk to keep time. One day in 1933



[Reproduced by permission of Fox Photos.  
BESSIE AND GEORGE LANSBURY—1929]

[Face page 8]

my wife and I went to a concert in the poorest ward of Poplar. In the interval a dear old lady came up and offered us a cup of tea. We got talking and I told her she looked very much like my mother just before she died. Thus flattered she became reminiscent. She was seventy-one years old and had actually attended the same school as mother and had belonged to the Band of Hope. She recalled, with enthusiasm, one of their early songs, the refrain of which ran,

Nail the Cross on the door,  
Throw the bottle on the floor.

She eyed me rather closely and was, I thought, asking herself whether I had thrown the bottle on the floor, and whether I had emptied it first.

Father and mother never went to theatres. Life was real and earnest, and even had it not been, lack of money would have barred such a luxury. Further, the teachings of the pastors and masters of those days, were all against theatres and music halls. For it was an unproductive period, round about 1870, when the watchword of the religious might well have been "Be good, and let who will be happy".

It was in this atmosphere that father spent his youth and a good deal of his early manhood, and it is surely a tribute to his character that his seventy-fourth year should reveal him, not a stern, lugubrious, kill-joy fanatic, but the champion of the cause of "Brighter England" as the newspapers phrase it, and the implacable enemy of those who consider it their mission in life to poke their noses into

the private affairs of the poor, find out what they are doing or what they want to do, and forbid them.

Father's motto might be: "Suffer the people to be happy and free, and forbid them not".

Father has been an "elected person" in one capacity or another for most of his life. But he is exceptional. Elected persons usually act in whatever manner is calculated to please the most powerful of their supporters. Thus we find members of Parliament who never deny themselves their whisky and soda, helping to pass laws to make it difficult for the unelected masses to get their glass of beer. Town and Parish Councillors act in a similar manner. Whatever their own personal habits may be, the vast majority of them act in public on the assumption that such things as Sunday cinemas, football, greyhound racing, beer, and the hundred and one things that seem to please and interest the poor should be abolished.

Everything that pleases and interests the poor may in fact be bad, but the poor have discovered, like the rich, that man cannot live by good alone. Shortly, they want to be allowed to go to the devil in their own way. Local big-noises and national potentates who spend their Sundays playing golf, riding, shooting, or motoring about the countryside, lunching and dining at their leisure, sternly frown upon the efforts of those who cannot afford motors, golfing, or shooting to beguile the tedium of the English Sabbath. Unluckily, the growth of wisdom is slow and gradual, and eternal vigilance, though it be the price of liberty, is sadly on the wane. When

absolute prohibition cannot be made to fit in with the times, a plan called "local option" is employed whereby those who don't want to go to the cinema on Sunday may prevent those who do.

This is indeed a peculiarity of the English—they are so busy working most of the time and trying to amuse themselves the rest of the time that they fail to notice the interference of small bodies of bigots and fanatics who think that if solemnity and a great parade of sobriety and righteousness are good for themselves such postures must be good for everybody else. Their idea is that if people appear to be passing through the world in a carefree and happy manner something must be done about it, a committee set up, or a circular letter sent to the *Times*. So we find ourselves robbed of our freedom, and the robber busy in the next parish almost before the theft has been discovered, if it ever is discovered.

Self-appointed censors and prohibitors of other people's amusement develop power and influence out of all proportion to their numbers or their brains. They usually form the only really well-organised force in the parish or constituency and according to the disposition of their forces candidates are elected or defeated. It is strange but true that the very people whose liberties are assailed often fall under the influence of these active minorities whom they regard as of a superior type to themselves. The pastor and the vicar still represent a sort of undefined goodness in the eyes of thousands who never enter a chapel or a church; and the local preachers of

temperance and teetotal societies hold sway in some obscure way over millions to whom strong drink is a daily balm. Their influence on votes is out of all proportion to their numbers, and so we find, in fear of them, scores of members of Parliament voting for repressive and restrictive legislation upon which their own mode of life sometimes provides a fitting commentary.

Whatever the Editor of the *Evening News* thinks of father as Pacifist and Socialist, there is no mistaking his opinion of father's domestic activities as First Commissioner of Works in the Labour Government. He wrote the following:

#### WE WANT MORE LANSBURYS

The First Commissioner of Works rose to his full stature yesterday when he confronted a posse of temperance M.P.'s and told them that he would not be bullied or cajoled into adopting prohibitionist measures in which he did not believe.

The deputation came to him to protest against the granting of a license for the sale of drink in the Tilt Yard restaurant at Hampton Court. In a word they demand that although the Government has not been given, and has never sought a mandate to impose teetotalism on the country, it should nevertheless impose it in places that come, as Hampton Court and Royal Parks do, under its direct control.

Mr. Lansbury, in rejecting their demand, acted rightly and constitutionally. Whether their views are right or wrong, and however good their intentions may be, the Prohibitionists must attain their ends by straightforward



constitutional methods. Meanwhile the Government, until the nation expresses a desire for a change, must concern itself, as hitherto, not with stopping the consumption of alcohol but, as Mr. Lansbury put it, with seeing that the conditions under which it is consumed are more wholesome.

. . . . .

If only we had a few more wise men and a few less busybodies in the management of our public affairs! Mr. Lansbury told the deputation that he "would rather the people choose themselves what they should eat or drink".

. . . . .

. . . We could do with a deal fewer cranks in the House of Commons; but still more, we could do with a great many more Lansburys in the control of the nation's affairs, and we do not care particularly to what party or what Government they belong.

It is pretty safe to say that not many cabinet ministers have had such encomiums passed upon them by their opponents. The following is a summary of the views of James Douglas given in the *Sunday Express* on the 5th July, 1931:

The Lansbury lead may bring about a complete revolution in our drinking habits. It may make drink safe for democracy by making it public and social instead of private and anti-social. The man who drinks with his wife and children is certain to be more temperate than the man who drinks without them.

And again:

I hope Mr. Lansbury's lead will be followed by municipalities all over the land, so that soon all Britons will enjoy

the liberty to drink a glass of beer in their public parks, like Germans, French, and other civilised people who can drink without becoming drunkards.

Scores of similar articles appeared in the press during his short term of office as First Commissioner of Works. They counterbalance to a certain extent the rather bitter attacks of some of his own friends, such as Philip Snowden and Dr. Salter, and the bumptious hostility of Lady Astor—all fanatics where other people's drink is concerned.

Father hates drunkenness. He is appalled in the presence of a drunken man, whether in the House of Commons or in the street. I have seen him in the House of Commons suffering unspeakable torments while an obviously incapable member (I will not mention the party to which he belonged), swaying and reeling, but holding tightly to his hand, endeavoured to articulate some words of praise for a recently delivered speech. Too soft-hearted to break away, and too hurt to dissemble his feelings with a joke as most of us would do, he waited for a pause in the torrent of incoherency, and then with infinite feeling said: "Yes, old boy, I know, but I *do* wish you wouldn't drink quite so much."

Father would rather every adult spent at least some part of the Sabbath at a serious meeting of some sort, at a church, a chapel, or a socialist or even a tory meeting. In his heart he believes that no system of society will yield happiness to mankind

until mankind becomes aware of the importance and the reality of spiritual and non-personal things. He is a Socialist because he believes that in a socialist society, relieved of constant preoccupation with the task of getting our daily bread, we shall have and use more opportunities for developing the spiritual side of life. Yet he is not so blindly fanatical as to want to fill the churches and chapels and meeting places by closing the cinemas and other places of amusement; nor would he try to make people sober by closing public-houses and in other ways putting obstacles in the way of those who want to drink. He ranks freedom higher than sobriety.

He thinks people may reach salvation, heaven, peace, or whatever name it is given, through personal effort, trial and error, but that they cannot be driven or forced to that end. Salvation may come only through sin and suffering.

He is impatient of current talk about the need of a "Leader". He himself as a youth stood as one of thousands, to support Charles Bradlaugh in his fight for religious and political freedom. He says (with a great deal of impatience) that he didn't have to be told to do this; he just went up to Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park or the House of Commons, and gave whatever support he was capable of. He thinks the youth of to-day could find enough dragons to slay and maidens to save if they only had the initiative and courage to go forth and find them. No leader can save the people. They have had

their fill of leaders. Father may think of John Burns, Frank Hodges, Thomas, MacDonald and many others and say to himself, as Browning's old priest said to himself in "A Soul's Tragedy," (laughing gently as he said it), "I have known three and twenty leaders of revolts."

## IV

### THE LADDER OF FAME, AND A WORD ABOUT CLOTHES

GEORGE LANSBURY never looked upon life as a matter of achieving wealth or fame; it would therefore be a waste of time to search the records, if any, of his earliest days to find out just how and when he put his foot on the bottom rung of the proverbial ladder up which, it is supposed, newspaper boys, shoe-blacks, vanboys and the like, climb to those realms where moth and rust corrupt and thieves break through and steal. His foot was never on the bottom rung or the top rung or on any of the intermediate rungs.

In short, he is not a climber. He believes, not in keeping contact with the people but in keeping among them; not merely in understanding their sorrows, their miseries and their joys, but in sharing them. With one or two rare exceptions intimate friendships between him and middle and upper class people do not exist. Political friendship there may be, but hardly ever intimate personal friendship. His really intimate friends are among the poor, and even these he knows as groups rather than as individuals.

It may be objected that you cannot have intimate friendships with groups or classes of people. But you can. Father is intimate with the workers everywhere. Walk with him one day across London and you will hear him greeted intimately by scores of people whom he has never seen in his life. They have seen him, though, and heard him, and though he knew it not (but perhaps he did know) he had touched their hearts, and made them intimate with him for ever.

If you admire those who by "the unsparing use of the tomahawk and scalping knife" (as was said of Disraeli) carve their way to fame and power, you will not admire George Lansbury.

The first three decades of the twentieth century have seen a lad from a miner's cottage graduating from the extreme left to the extreme right of the Labour Movement, shake himself free from his earlier environment to sit as a director of a huge industrial concern; an engine-cleaner has worked his way through from the lower ranks of his trade union to Town Council, House of Commons, Cabinet and Privy Council and now remains, applauded in the society columns, a pillar of *laissez faire*, a fashionable anecdotist and friend of Kings. An eloquent and entirely respectable Socialist, after a lifetime of devoted work as organiser, secretary and agitator in the Labour Movement now finds himself Prime Minister of a conservative government (miscalled "national" government).

There is no need to detail the steps by which these transitions were accomplished. All except MacDonald seem quite happy in their new environment, appear to feel no incongruity, and are doubtless glad to receive the praises and flattery of their latest friends and associates. I have made an exception in MacDonald's case, for there never was a more unhappy, forlorn, lack-lustre success. I think A. A. Milne ought to write another play called *Success*—all about MacDonald.

For those who achieve in this sort of way the ladder of fame must have seemed very real and every rung must have held a thrill. Looking down from the top, their former world must have seemed poor and mean indeed, peopled by hordes of wretched little fellows poking and scratching about for a living all oblivious of what might be theirs if they only knew how to get their foot on that first rung of the ladder and had the audacity to climb.

I wonder if Thomas, Hodges, or MacDonald ever in their early propaganda days made use of Jack Jones' fable of the flies in the jam pot who lent their bodies to be pressed down farther in the jam so that one might escape on the backs of his comrades to bring succour? No sooner had the lucky one wiped his wings than off he flew and forgot all about his fellows.

George Lansbury has risen in his own way, but has never allowed anything to come between him and the masses to whom he belongs, amongst whom he lives, and who are his inspiration. Often one must

hear J. H. Thomas loudly praising the country in which one so lowly as he once was is able to climb so high. He is proud, he thinks the Nation ought to be proud, and that every individual in the country ought to be proud. Father is different. He is to-day, literally as well as spiritually, where he was in the beginning—amongst the people. His rugged figure is never seen at fashionable drawing-room gatherings of clever people among whom epigrams and witty conversation are the order of the day. He would be like a bear in a china shop. His voice, deep and rough, in which sorrow and sympathy seem to have found an echo, would make smart people uncomfortable and clever people unhappy. I don't think he ever tried to frame an epigram or say a smart thing. Certainly he could not, even if he tried, tell what is erroneously called a "questionable" story. In conversation, as in public speeches, he always says what he wants to say in simple straightforward language.

He is not at home at any purely social functions (except local Labour Party or I.L.P. socials and bazaars), and unless he has been asked to appeal for some charity or cause, never attends the many impressive banquets given on great occasions by the Speaker, the Lord Mayor and other public functionaries. One can almost hear him saying, "If they want to make a collection for a hospital why don't they jolly-well (a favourite adjective of his) pass round the hat without all the fuss and bother of a banquet." He has never been to a Royal Levee



and in this, as a cabinet minister, has broken an unwritten law. His attitude is not mere recalcitrancy or boorishness. Quite simply it indicates that in his view such affairs are a waste of time and money.

As for the ceremonial wearing of swords, medals, decorations, knee-breeches and billycock hats, I know that he regards it as so much "tommy-rot"—not to mention the terrific waste (or perhaps it is better to say misdirection) of money. Of course he is right. In twenty-five or at the outside fifty years, all this strutting and toy-soldiering will have gone the way of the old stage coach. In days when swords and guns are giving place to poison gas in warfare, it may be the fashion to wear an imitation phial of poison gas or even a fancy-dress gas-mask. Father regards the Royal Family as victims of all this tomfoolery—kept up to satisfy the innate snobbishness of prominent politicians and successful business men, and to give the newspapers something to talk about. Is there anyone in the wide world (outside of America) who will say a good word for the amazing formality of being presented at Court? Dressmakers perhaps, and tailors, and of course those for whose gratification the King and Queen are put to so much inconvenience.

The state of father's clothes, or the wearing of them, never troubled him in the least until he became a cabinet minister. Even then it only troubled him a little. His reefer jacket and baggy trousers served

for all occasions. I think his continental prototype must have been Monsieur Briand. Fifty-five years ago he wore a topper and a frock coat and was photographed in them. But that was an occasion. He was getting married. His first baby took fright at the sight of him in the shiny topper, whereupon he jumped on it, sat on it, and then tore it to pieces before the baby's eyes—just to show that it couldn't hurt.

Smart clothes to him are unreal, like smart talk. If it amuses others to turn words and sentences about so that plain truth may become subtle and clever, well let them! If it pleases others to wear striking clothes or elegant apparel of any sort, let them do so. For him the purpose of speech is to express thoughts, not to hide them: and the purpose of clothes is to protect the body, not to exhibit it. He never wears gloves, sock-suspenders, spats, tie-pins, or any of the normal impedimenta of the average man. Since mother died he has worn her thick gold wedding ring. Before she died (barely a year ago) he had never worn a ring of any description and would as soon have thought of wearing a ring through his nose as a ring on his finger. But I think her ring on his finger somehow keeps him in touch with "Bessie." He talks of her often, always sadly; when she died she left an empty place in his heart which will remain empty till he follows her. How slow to him must seem the passage of time, with its failures, its disappointments, its day by day anxieties; and how desolating the occasional doubt and glorious the emotional certainty

of re-union again. Firmly, irrationally if you like, he believes they will meet again.

His bowler hat is proverbial. He would be almost unrecognisable without it. Even twenty-eight years ago when I was attending King's College and expected to be reasonably well dressed, I used to wear his second-hand bowlers. They *were* second-hand too; no one ever used bowlers so badly. They served two purposes, first to cover his head, and second at open air meetings for "passing round the hat."

Imagine then his position as a minister of the Crown. To make the necessary visit to the King, a topper and morning coat were said to be essential. Among the trivialities of life, this matter loomed. Obviously no question of principle was involved. Clothes cannot unmake a man any more than they can make him. But when things happen that make one feel incongruous something has to be done. So father bought his *second* topper.

There was a touch of comedy about his appearance at MacDonald's first sessional dinner. The invitation had read—"Evening dress", and as he hadn't got evening dress he wrote a note to his chief asking whether it would matter if he went "as he was". MacDonald did not reply personally but instructed one of his secretaries to say that it was imperative that father should attend in "tails" and full regalia. I can quite understand MacDonald not answering personally. He surely would have realised the absurdity of telling a man of seventy what he should

wear. But father gave in and ordered the necessary clothes from his tailor. Curiously enough, a higher power was to take the matter in hand. Jimmy Thomas called a special Committee meeting on the evening of the dinner. It lasted so long that there was no time to go home and change; so father went along in his well worn reefer jacket and baggy trousers. I suppose no one enjoyed their meal any the less because of his shocking appearance.

But I am certain that at this and at all similar functions he felt somehow "declassed" and out of place, due to no feeling of social or mental inferiority, but the result of his whole life and work. He would never for one moment forget the misery and destitution of the millions who voted Labour at the general election; he must have contrasted the efficiency with which state banquets are organised and the generosity with which state hospitality is dispensed with the ineptitude and parsimoniousness displayed on all hands when unemployment and the relief of distress are under discussion.

I can imagine one condition upon which he would willingly attend say the Lord Mayor's Banquet; it would be that he might read to the assembled notabilities a page or two from Ruskin's *Unto this Last*. He quotes it often, in and out of the House of Commons, because he thinks it contains the key to the so-called problem of poverty:

Luxury is indeed possible in the future—innocent and exquisite; luxury for all, and by the help of all; but luxury

at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruellest man living could not sit at his feast unless he sat blindfold. Raise the veil boldly; face the light; and if, as yet, the light of the eye can only be through tears, and the light of the body through sack-cloth, go thou forth weeping, bearing precious seed, until the time come, and the kingdom, when Christ's gift of bread, and bequest of peace, shall be "unto this last as unto thee."

## V

### HIS MOTHER, AND THE OLD DAME'S SCHOOL

NONE of us know much about father's parents, though we know that he loved and admired his mother (a Victorian type "whose word was law"—to her children) and seemed to be moved less by recollections of his father. The latter was a contractor, employing and superintending gangs of labourers first on railway construction and later at a coal depôt. He died young, before father was sixteen, and seems to have left very few lasting impressions upon his children.

As father often said, for most of the time his mother filled the position of both parents. She must have been a martinet if our own mother's opinion of her is anything to go by. For whenever our behaviour was specially atrocious, if, let us say, we got our Sunday clothes badly soiled, or our boots out at the toes through playing too much football in the dusty roads, she would say, "You ought to have had your *father's* mother, *she* would soon have put a stop to your capers." The memory of the same strict disciplinarian would be invoked when the girls rebelled against having their hair cut

short, so that they looked like boys, and wearing those hideous hoopcombs to keep it back behind their ears.

Father himself never goes into details about his mother, but we gather, even from him, that she was, to say the least, firm with her children. In those days firmness spelt punishment. But whether she punished them with canes or (more terribly) by word of mouth, we do not know. It is a thing I shall never know because I shall never ask. I should guess that she visited the wrongdoings of her children mostly with serious talk, and occasionally with severe wallopings, practising the wisdom of Solomon so as not to spoil the children.

Certainly, she must have been a woman of courage and resource. Nobody seems to know where she met her husband, but one thing is clear,—she ran away from home to marry him when he was eighteen and she just over sixteen, and thereafter never saw a single member of her own family for eight years, during which her life's work of bearing and rearing a family of nine was begun. One can only imagine the trials and hardships of those days when she and her husband travelled, mostly by road, far into the eastern counties and throughout southern England, wherever the breadwinner's work took them.

Frequently when a job of work was done the whole family, all young and certainly including a baby a few weeks or months old, would be uprooted and carried away to some outlandish place where a

cutting had to be made or a viaduct built to pave the way for modern transport and movement of goods. One such outlandish place was Halesworth, in Suffolk, where the subject of this book was born. As he himself says: "I was born there and that's about all."

When he was six, the family (now four or five strong, excluding parents) was camped in Kent. Lansbury père was helping to make the London Chatham and Dover Railway what it used to be before the age of amalgamation, rationalisation and electrification. The constructional workers and their families lived in wooden huts very much poorer looking than those you may see to this day along the approach to the Blackwall Tunnel on the south side of the Thames; but the modern ones are a relic of the War, only tolerated as human habitations because of the acute (and unnecessary) housing shortage, whereas the earlier ones were in the nature of pioneer towns, housing those whose work was to smooth things out and get things ship-shape for the building of the more lasting dwellings which form modern Bromley, Beckenham, Sidcup, Sydenham, etc.

The next move was to Greenwich, thence to Bethnal Green, and finally to Whitechapel, where the family occupied a huge early Georgian house in the grounds of the coal depôt of the Great Eastern Railway; and here the family stayed for a considerable time.

Father's early education was patchy. How could it have been otherwise? They lived like nomads, not following herds like the wanderers of the East,



but following their bread and butter. Nevertheless certain periods stand out, during which work was prolonged, the place of work fixed, and the education and general bringing up of the children regular.

There were three such periods before father reached the age of eight, the places being Greenwich, Sydenham, and Bethnal Green. It may seem curious to talk of education before the age of eight. But for most children education finished at twelve or thirteen, and had to be started at three. In 1865 the first and the last of these places were sleepy localities abounding in dairies, piggeries, small farms and market gardens. Even in Bow as recently as 1895 we used to be shocked by the loud and prolonged squealing of pigs being put to the slaughter fifty yards or so from our house. We used to think they were boiled alive, and never could eat boiled pork.

At Bethnal Green father received his schooling at St. James-the-Less and was perhaps beginning to feel his feet; but at Sydenham a little earlier the "school" was a room in a cottage and the staff consisted of a solitary old dame who exacted respect from her pupils and encouraged them to learn their sums with the aid of a stick. Father was a great favourite, however, and rose to be head boy, though what this achievement was worth could only be gauged by the number of pupils the old lady crammed into her tiny room. This we do not know. She spent most of her time during school hours sewing and knitting—no doubt a contributory factor to the

aforementioned patchiness of father's education—and the position of head boy carried with it the honour and responsibility of threading the old dame's needle and assisting in the unravelling of her wool. Between the ages of eight and fifteen he must have been taken in hand seriously, for by that time he could read well, write well and speak well. And there his schooling, though not his education, stopped. From then onwards, he was a tireless reader, a writer to the newspapers, and an indefatigable public speaker. I doubt whether there is a man in the whole world who has addressed more meetings, indoor, outdoor, public and private, than George Lansbury.

The school attached to Whitechapel Church was responsible for most of father's serious education. It was one of the many "church" or "denominational" schools, the existence of which caused such a hubbub when the elementary education of London's children was put in the hands of the London County Council. For many years after his school days father kept in touch with the schoolmaster (Michael Apted—"a real good sort") and with the Rector of Whitechapel (Mr. J. F. Kitto) who later on married him to Elizabeth Jane Brine, and remained one of the few really intimate friends of the family. In after years father used to take his children (at any rate his first three or four) to the Christmas Party given by Mr. Kitto at the school. It was a rare treat for us, including a ride along the Bow and Mile End roads on the old horse tram, and a good tuck in of Christmas pudding, with a present

of some sort and the usual orange and bun to bring home.

There was something unusual about that church school. Whatever its standard of elementary education may have been, it certainly fostered to an unusual degree the sort of esprit de corps which, although not at all rare in modern council schools, was certainly lacking in the majority of private elementary schools of those days. School rivalries are now settled on football fields and cricket pitches. Then, however, they frequently assumed quite serious dimensions, and were settled in the streets. School fights were the order of the day, and many a time have we been treated by father to graphic descriptions of specially memorable street battles in which the weapons were wooden cudgels, hobnailed boots, and most deadly of all, the "kerb-stone" rolled up in a cloth cap and swung at the end of a string.

Speaking as a street fighter of a later generation, I do not hesitate to place the last-mentioned at the head of the list of weapons for general utility and effectiveness. The sight of a swarm of boys armed in this fashion charging down the street, whirling their "kerbies" round their heads and uttering terrifying war-whoops is never to be forgotten. Rarely could an encounter be termed a "pitched battle" for one side would usually break and run at the first shock and the ensuing "running fight" would continue until the many isolated units were rendered hors-de-combat or reached a friendly door.

Father is now a pacifist, but there is no denying the relish with which, in middle age, he used to fight these battles over again and earn our applause as we consumed our supper of bread and cheese and cocoa round the kitchen fire.

Whether the school was successful according to official standards is open to question. It is not open to question, however, that the scholars developed a keen interest in the politics of the day, and in the history of their own country. Father's knowledge of history is wide if a little inexact. I should say he knows why and how King John signed the Great Charter without knowing the date or the names of the barons who compelled him to sign it. This is my idea of him though it may do him an injustice. Nearly thirty years ago when I was studying "Green's Short History of the English People" he seemed to me to know it from cover to cover. It still thrills him to read about Simon de Montfort and the beginnings of Parliament, about Cromwell and his Ironsides. But here again secondary names and all dates might elude him. He would not be interested in them but only in the general current of thought and movement of opinion. In later years he was a voracious reader of historical classics, Motley's *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Scott's historical novels he knew almost by heart; Justin Macarthy's *History of our own Times* was for years his "bedside novel".

His vitality is amazing. After a week of work which would send younger men to the country to recuperate, you will find him on Saturday afternoons conducting parties of school children over the Houses of Parliament, pointing out objects of interest and explaining the historical scenes depicted on the huge mural paintings in the lobbies. In particular, he indicates with quiet relish the spot upon which King Charles stood his trial in Westminster Hall for plotting against Parliament. A cautionary tale with a vengeance. He used it just before the election of 1924 and this indiscretion I imagine kept him out of the first Labour Government. I often wonder whether these post-Victorian (even post-war) children can possibly feel so impressed as they look; I am certain they are not more deeply impressed than their guide. Yet he will artfully dissemble his mood (like one who makes a joke at a funeral) by directing his young guests' attention to "that old jossor over there"—indicating a statue or a bust or a painting, or even a passing member; or to "that skinny old johnnie who looks as though he could do with a good square meal"—perhaps a statue of Disraeli.

Nor will this exacting Saturday finish his week's work. The Sunday will find him in some remote part of the country preaching his message throughout the afternoon and evening, and sometimes during the morning too. It may seem easy to him now when thousands flock to hear him wherever he goes; whatever he says finds acquiescence and applause

from the majority of his hearers. But it was not always so. His audiences have varied in numbers from ten to ten thousand, and in attitude from riotous hostility to ecstatic applause. It is a far cry indeed to the days when he would set out from his working class home on a Saturday night catching a late train to the North of England or Scotland, literally carrying the Red Flag with him under his arm, ready to set it up in the market place of a distant village or town and with the aid of one or two local stalwarts preach the gospel of socialism.

At one period we lived within fifty yards of the Great Eastern Railway where it passed through Bow, and many a time have we waited eagerly for his express train to thunder past our windows. We used to wave our handkerchiefs and he would poke the red flag through the carriage window. There were so many of us at our window that I, being one of the youngest, rarely got a sight of the flag itself and had to make do with the reports of the elder ones who monopolised the best positions. In our own house we were almost ecstatic; but how father explained his strange behaviour to his fellow passengers I do not know.

It is good for us at least to know that in 1933 he hasn't to travel so far to get a hearing for his message. Could he have known in 1887 that nearly fifty years later he would sit in a luxurious room in the heart of London and, under the auspices of the British Broadcasting Corporation, address as many millions

as cared to listen to him in every part of the world on the subject of socialism and peace, he might have suffered with tranquillity the hardships, the failures, the disappointments and the heartaches of those earliest efforts.

## VI

### ICONOCLAST?

FATHER is an iconoclast by conviction only; by nature he would be an upholder of tradition and an observer of ancient customs. Nevertheless the funniest speech he ever made in his life was when, shortly after his election to Parliament for the first time in 1911, he gave his supporters in Bow a detailed description of the procedure and the personalities of the House of Commons. For an hour and a half he kept his audience in paroxysms of laughter describing the cumbrous working of the machinery for counting votes, the quaint phraseology of the Speaker with his "All in favour say 'Aye', all against say 'No'—I think the 'Ayes' have it (shouts of 'No, no').—'Division', and then 'Ayes' to the right, 'Noes' to the left," and so on. To the men and women of Bow and Bromley, sceptical and critical of all governments and even machinery of government as they had been taught to be through three decades of Socialist agitation and education, father's performance seemed equal to Dan Leno at his best. Amid delighted shrieks from the women and roars of laughter from the men, he covered with ridicule the whole procedure of the House of Commons, with



its portentous looking Mace-bearer, its solemn Black Rod, and its ancient Sergeant-at-Arms with his silken hose, knee-breeches, and (crowning anachronism) his sword.

The speech sprang from conviction and was grounded in common-sense. It was followed by scathing denunciation of the sham and make-believe of it all, the waste of time and money involved while so much real work was waiting to be done. Such pomp and ceremony, such unreality, were out of place while unemployment and destitution stalked the land and the people "drooped and died". Alas, that after more than a quarter of a century the work of the nation should be impeded still by the same nonsensical rigmarole; that unemployment and destitution should be more acute than ever. The following interview given shortly after his first election in 1910 throws a further light on father's feelings at the time:

## ALL HUMBUG

### THE SUSPICIONS OF MR. LANSBURY, M.P.

Mr. George Lansbury, the Socialist M.P. has been interviewed by the *Labour Leader* on the subject of the House of Commons.

"Don't get it into your head that we are overworked and overburdened," Mr. Lansbury said. "The House of Commons is the most delightful club in the world, and everyone is nice and pleasant. Don't make any mistake about it, the so-called upper classes know how to get the soft side of you. But when they are so kind in the House

of Commons I feel that they have their tongues in their cheek the whole time. They will be exceedingly courteous to you, but I have the impression that their very friendship is often an effort to blunt your keenness to get them off the backs of the workers. I have a shrewd suspicion they smile behind our backs and congratulate themselves on how they are compromising our determination to win social justice. No it is not work in the House of Commons that overworks you, it is want of work, the want of anything effective to do."

"And what of the procedure?" Mr. Lansbury was asked.

"It is worthy of a lunatic asylum," he replied. "Take the all-night sittings. I have been taken to task for not sitting up the other night when the opposition gave Churchill a warm time. Well, I will sit up when necessary, but I am not going to sit up for the fun of it.

"After the all-night sitting to which I have referred, member after member of all parties came up to me and said, 'You missed a beano last night—it was as good as a music-hall.' I replied, 'If I want a beano I can go to the Alhambra for a shilling and go to bed too'.

"That is characteristic of the atmosphere of 'unreality' in the Commons. To talk about the House as a scene of a gigantic struggle between people and peers is all humbug."

Again the following article by the parliamentary representative of the *Pall Mall Gazette* of February 28th, 1911, illustrates one of the numerous efforts he made to break up the quiet and peaceful atmosphere of the debates.

Mr. Lansbury is going ahead. He woke us up this afternoon at a moment when everybody was drowsing over a dull question list. Once more he was on the track of Mr.

John Burns. He and other members have been urging the President of the Local Government Board to give an undertaking that a new Order suggested by the Departmental Committee on Outdoor Relief shall not be issued until the House of Commons has had an opportunity of discussing it.

There is a boom of menace in Mr. Lansbury's voice that makes us think sometimes of Mr. Victor Grayson. Moreover, he has not yet got used to the ways of the House, and cannot bring himself to remember that at question time only questions are permitted.

The superciliously defiant air of Mr. Burns infuriates him so much that he breaks into hot disputation. Not content with going for the President of the Local Government Board, he also goes for the Opposition for daring to cry "Order!" amidst his wordy irregularities.

While he was engaged in this double fight this afternoon he was once more reminded by the Speaker that he must not keep up a running dispute at question time. But Mr. Lansbury felt too deeply injured by the treatment he had received from Mr. Burns to show any deep conviction of personal wrongdoing.

Three times, he said, he had tried to wring from the President of the Local Government Board a straight answer to a straight question, and he had failed. "None of us," he angrily exclaimed, "can get an answer."

The Speaker endeavoured to turn the wrath of Mr. Lansbury good-humouredly. "The hon. member," said Mr. Lowther, "is very lucky to have only asked his question three times." Mr. Lansbury was still a bit rebellious, and the Opposition again cried "Order!"

This time Mr. Will Thorne, rallying to the assistance of his East End colleague, shouted across the floor: "Order yourselves! There is only one Chairman." Then the trouble died down, but "my friend Lansbury" kept an

angry eye on Mr. Burns, who for his part looked quite serene.

Many years later, in December, 1929, he betrayed a justifiable irritation at the astonishing solemnity with which trivialities are frequently invested in the House of Commons. The account is given in the *Evening News* of 11th December, 1929:

“ASK ME ANOTHER.”

HOW MR. LANSBURY ANSWERED AN M.P.'s QUESTION.

One of the most amusing replies given in recent times to a supplementary question in the House of Commons was that delivered by Mr. George Lansbury, the First Commissioner of Works, this afternoon.

He had stated that it would take £90 to instal an annunciator in the tearoom of the House, and £20 a year to maintain it.

Thereupon Mr. Isaac Foot asked whether the installation of an annunciator in the tearoom would be likely to increase or to diminish the attendance in the Chamber itself.

“Oh! ask me another,” replied Mr. Lansbury wearily, and members roared with laughter.

## VII

### EARLY DAYS IN POPLAR

ON a certain day in the early 'nineties George Lansbury took his coat off the nail, rolled down his shirt-sleeves, and left his job of veneer dryer in his father-in-law's timber yard to cross the road and take his place on a relief committee of the Poplar Board of Guardians. He had been elected Guardian of the Poor for the west ward of Bow and Bromley with Lena Wilson, another member of the Social Democratic Federation, and the two of them joined Will Crooks and one or two others on the Board to form a party in which the steady Liberal-Labourism of Crooks was counterbalanced by the revolutionary ardour of the Social Democrats. This was father's first experience as an elected person. He sat side by side with local employers of labour, grand ladies of the Charity Organization Society, local tradesmen and others who together form the local political life of the average London borough. His first action was downright and characteristic; he was asked to take tea with the chairman of the committee, quite an innocent and simple little affair no doubt.

Unfortunately for the old stagers on the committee the new member asked who was to pay for the tea, and on being told that he would be the guest of the

chairman, replied that he would rather pay for his own, as, being a mere workman he would not be able to return the compliment. After that everybody paid for his own. This will seem trivial in days when it is customary for public committees and councils to feed themselves more or less well at the public expense at every conceivable opportunity. But in those days it was a good gesture and a bold one and drew attention to the fact that something new had happened in local politics. Some of the mutual back-scratching and log-rolling was going to stop.

The fact that father is exceedingly popular among his political opponents is a tribute to his sincerity and their generosity. Particularly is this true of his local opponents in Bow and Bromley. For at least twenty years he led the attack against the united anti-socialist forces in the borough, whether they called themselves Liberals, Conservatives, Municipal Reformers, Tariff Reformers, Imperialists, or Free Traders. He paid them the compliment of attacking them as though they personified all the evils of capitalism, landlordism and parasitism. In reality they were the usual more or less harmful local types—milkmen, jobbing builders employing perhaps three or four men, lay preachers, Church of England parsons, undertakers, bakers, foremen of factories and occasionally directors or secretaries of companies deputed by their employers to keep down the rates.

Strange as it may seem the people of Poplar used to elect representatives of Spratt's, Bryant & May's

and other big companies to the Board of Guardians and Borough Council, and it was not till after 1918 that they woke up and realized the clash of interests which always exists between large rate-paying concerns with the financial interests of shareholders to conserve, and those who benefit by a wide and generous (if costly) administration of social services. All these types of council member admired or pretended to admire George Lansbury; yet he attacked them all in the press and on the platform with a ferocity seldom employed in political debates in the 1930's.

Shopkeepers, factory and property owners and local tradesmen quite openly sought election to the local council to keep down the rates. The idea that money is of no use to anybody until it is spent never occurred to them; nor did it strike their imaginations that a question equally important with the question of how much you spend is what you get for your money. For them, high rates were the devil, whether the money was spent on sanitation, road maintenance, education, or to provide elementary comforts for the sick and needy, or work or maintenance for able-bodied unemployed. The jobbing builder and contractor frequently saw in local politics an opportunity to become acquainted with those who had work to offer. Owners of house property sought election to the council because as councillors they would be able to resist the demands of the Medical Officer of Health who might serve them with slum demolition orders, or compel them

to put their house-property in a state fit for human habitation.

However friendly to father in a personal sense these men may have been he never spared them in his writings or speeches. Then, as now, he always disclaimed any desire to attack individuals, and blamed the system for making them what they were.

Nevertheless, in his election campaigns he described them as hoodlers and jerrybuilders, "body-snatchers" and as despoilers of widows who ground the faces of the poor. He used to remark with a certain grim humour on the eagerness of undertakers to become members of the "House Committee" (euphemism for Workhouse Committee), from which position they might keep a watchful eye on the old people, weighing up their expectation of life, and taking their general measurements with a practised eye with a view to the time when their final demand on the community for a deal coffin would fall due. The presence of milkmen on the Council was just as easily accounted for. Firstly, as councillors, they might speak with more weight on their own behalf as purveyors to the Guardians, and secondly, they might water their milk with less interference from the Public Health Department of the Council of which they were members.

Then again, the law that no member of a local governing body should be allowed to enter into a business contract with the body of which he was a member was quite easily evaded in spirit though not in the letter. For it was quite a simple matter



for Mr. Jones, the milkman (member of the Council), to speak up for Mr. Brown, the contractor (member of the Board of Guardians), so that Mr. Brown might secure the contract for making or repairing the highways. And of course Mr. Brown, the contractor, from his place on the Guardians would put in an effective word for his friend Mr. Jones, the milkman, when the placing of contracts for milk was under consideration by the Board. Yet when the election fight was at its height and oratory at full spate you would find father explaining to his eager followers, hot for blood, that after all we were "victims of the system", and that while capitalism continued nobody could be held to blame personally for the wrongs and sufferings of the people. This attitude, which I consider fundamentally unsound, he maintains to this day.

But if the poor are exploited, they are exploited, not by a system, but by individuals, whether landlords, shopkeepers, milkmen, or undertakers. Blaming the system for the ills of society is as futile as blaming nature for the sins of man. It won't do. A murderer cannot evade the consequences of his crime by pleading that it was due to faulty heredity and nasty environment, though we know that this may be quite true. Society is not yet ready to act in accordance with the theory of determinism. So also if we acquiesce in the continuance of a system which causes injustice and wrong to flourish then we in our individual capacities are responsible. The wealthy cannot disclaim responsibility on the plea

that they take no interest in politics, and only want to go on with their racing, their tennis, and their bridge; nor can the workers evade the charge of acquiescence in their own exploitation if they neglect politics and devote their minds and spare money to dog-racing, professional football, and betting.

It has been said that you cannot indict a nation. Much less can you indict a system. It is individuals who, because of fear of the future for themselves or their children spend their lives endeavouring to get rich; and it is individuals who spend lives of pleasure and vice while others labour and starve to support them. It is individuals who cause wars, individuals who invent aerial torpedoes; it is individuals who make treaties, and individuals who break them; it is individuals who exploit and individuals who are exploited; individuals who pay sweated wages and individuals who suffer them. This may be class doctrine, but it is sound. Father has often said in the House of Commons and on public platforms, "The poor are poor because they are robbed, and robbed because they are poor". This sounds like a slogan: yet I have heard father illustrating its truth by reference to prices of groceries in the market places of the East End and prices in West End Stores like Selfridge's. If price, quality, and service are taken into consideration, it will be found that with their meagre wages the poor actually pay more for their food than do the rich. Further, despite the activities of Food Inspectors and Medical

Officers of Health, the poor are often served in the shops with meat, eggs and butter which are dear at any price and unfit for human consumption.

Father spent his most thrilling, if not his greatest, days as a humble member of a Board of Guardians, fighting the battle of the destitute, the sick, the aged, and of unwanted and neglected children.

Paupers had no votes, and every extension of public assistance amongst the poor meant so many more voters struck off the register, and so many votes the less for the socialists whose policy caused them to be struck off. The cheap modern sneer against every form of public assistance—that it is nothing more than “mass bribery and corruption” given to get votes—was never used then. Obviously it could not apply. I agree entirely with the Tory argument that the removal of the “pauper disqualification” paved the way for the sudden and remarkable increase of Labour strength on all governing and administrative bodies, from the House of Commons down to the parish council. But they think it scandalous, whereas I think it reasonable. Even Tories thought it reasonable enough in the immediate post-war years when hundreds of thousands of ex-servicemen and their dependants were thrown on the mercies of the Poor Law. Father ridicules the “bribery and corruption” argument. He became a Guardian so that he might help the poor and would expect to be kicked out if, after election, he boggled at doing it.

The first job of work for the Socialists on the Poplar Board of Guardians was the cleaning up of

the administration of the Workhouse. It was a good name for the place, with no absurd terminological embellishment. In post-war days trustification of industry has become rationalisation of industry, war indemnities have become reparations, relief committees are public assistance committees, and the workhouse is "the Institution". Read his own words<sup>1</sup> on the state of the Poplar Workhouse when he first became a Poplar Guardian:

The place was clean; brass knobs and floors were polished, but of goodwill, kindness, there was none. Sick and aged, mentally deficient, lunatics, babies and children, able-bodied and tramps all herded together in one huge range of buildings. Officers, both men and women, looked upon these people as a nuisance and treated them accordingly. Food was mainly skilly, bread, margarine, cheese and hard tough meat and vegetables, and occasionally doses of salted, dried fish. Clothing was of the usual workhouse type, plenty of corduroy and blue cloth. No undergarments for either men or women, no sanitary clothes of any sort or kind for women of any age. Boots were worn till they fell off. The paupers were allowed out once a month or could be visited once a month. Able-bodied men were put to stone breaking or picking oakum. No effort was made to find work for men or women. Girls came in to be delivered of their babies, went out, and in course of time came back again.

. . . . .

Officials, receiving ward, hard forms, whitewashed walls, keys dangling at the waist of those who spoke to you, huge books for name, history, etc., searching, and then being stripped and bathed in a communal tub, and the final

<sup>1</sup> *My Life*, by George Lansbury (Constable and Co.)

crowning indignity of being dressed in clothes which had been worn by lots of other people, hideous to look at, ill-fitting and coarse—everything possible was done to inflict mental and moral degradation.

These were the conditions obtaining in workhouses all over the country. They were approved of by the Local Government Board whether the government of the day was Liberal or Tory. The idea was to make the lot of the pauper worse than that of the lowest paid worker in ordinary life. The fact that the lowest paid worker in ordinary life was sweated and his family half-starved did not affect the logic of the well-paid bureaucrats of the Local Government Board. Their idea was that if conditions in the workhouse were "more eligible" (another official euphemism) than those outside, workers would throw up their jobs and seek the peace and security of the workhouse.

Years later another light was thrown upon father's abhorrence of workhouses in a conversation with Lord George Hamilton. They were both members of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law and Relief of Distress and were visiting workhouses all over the country. The worthy peer was almost ecstatic in his praise of one institution. "Well, Lansbury, this is all right. No complaints here. You can say nothing against this. It is really delightfully clean and comfortable." The reply was direct and forceful but not exactly ecstatic; it might have struck Lord George as shocking: "Oh yes, my lord, it is too damned clean, too well regulated. Get up

with a bell, breakfast with a bell, dinner and supper likewise, then bed with a bell, and at the end heaven or hell with a bell. You wouldn't live here an hour. You wouldn't be found dead here by choice, neither would I. What is not good enough for you and me is neither clean nor comfortable enough for others."

In passing, it may be said that this rough and ready method of assessing the value of measures affecting the lives of the poor still holds good for G. L. The matter might not seem so simple to him if his own domestic life were differently ordered. But he lives simply and with no ostentation whatever. His food is of the plainest, his clothes everybody's concern but his own and certainly a disgrace to such a smartly-dressed assembly as the House of Commons.

His means of travel are the bus, the tube, a third-class railway compartment or a lift in someone else's car. If he dined at the Ritz, wintered at Cannes, and travelled by Rolls-Royce, he might have some difficulty in maintaining (he would not want to maintain) that what was good enough for him was good enough for the poor, or that what wasn't good enough for him wasn't good enough for the poor. The same attitude showed itself in a comic setting when he was being questioned as a witness before an earlier Commission set up to investigate the conditions of the aged poor. The Prince of Wales (later on Edward VII), a member of the Commission, asked him if he really thought the poor needed



GEORGE LANSBURY (STRAW HAT) AND KEIR HARDIE (WITH WALKING STICK)  
Photographed at "The Auld Brig o' Doon" in June, 1911.

underclothes. The answer was direct and simple. "They need them as much as you or I do."

Later on the Prince asked him just what he meant by the need for variety in food, and suggested that it might mean a biscuit occasionally. This time the answer must have caused a commotion: "Well, if you give them biscuits you will also have to supply them with teeth." Biscuits for paupers were made by the makers of dog-biscuits.

That Royalty was not upset by this style of answer is shown by a letter which reached father a day or two later, conveying the Prince's congratulations on the clarity with which he had put forward his evidence. Strangely enough the most unsatisfactory member of the Commission from a Socialist point of view was Henry Broadhurst, a pioneer trade-unionist and Member of Parliament. He appeared to be full of the idea that old-age pensions and outdoor relief would have a bad effect on the poorer classes. He was one of the earlier "Labour Members" or "Liberal-Labour" members who served only to emphasize the need for independent Labour representation of the Keir Hardie sort.

The Poplar Workhouse to-day is a standing witness to the earlier work of the pioneers. It is still a dreadful place in its way. It is still a place in which "nobody would willingly be found dead"—all institutions are. But the children (except new-born babies) have been taken out altogether and now live in the country at a school run on the "cottage homes" principle. Aged couples are no longer separated,



but live in special quarters with rooms of their own. Task work has been abolished. Whenever father saw so-called able-bodied men picking oakum and breaking stones his mind went back to the days when he himself, unemployed and all but destitute, with a young family to feed and shelter, took on the job of stone-breaking in Australia. He was used to hard manual work in those days, but still maintains that stone-breaking is the hardest and most soul-shattering work in the world. He says the work is terrible even for the skilled stone-breaker who understands the grain of stone and strikes the right spot; but for the unskilled worker the work is hell.

The dietary scales now employed in workhouses are, within certain limits, laid down by the Ministry of Health, the food being varied and on the whole good. The treatment of the inmates themselves by the officials has of course been revolutionised. Nowadays no official who valued his position would treat the people in his care with anything but gentleness and regard. A certain amount of this change may be attributed to the general trend of the times; but the question arises as to how much trend towards humanising the poor law there would have been had there been no rough and uncompromising pioneers thirty years ago. Or again, one might ask how long the improvement is likely to last if the breed of fighters and pioneers dies out.

There were other questions that had to be tackled by the first socialist members of the Poplar Board. From the beginning they were worried by the fact

that stores of linen, on examination, turned out to be calico, although the ratepayers had paid for linen. Food for which a fair price had been paid turned out to be bad. Cloth which should have measured thousands of yards measured only hundreds of yards. In other words, a good deal of slackness or dishonesty prevailed among certain officers of the institution.

For months the socialist members demanded a Local Government Board enquiry, and at last it was held. The officers concerned briefed McMorran, a Queen's Counsel of great eminence in Local Government affairs, whereas the case for the Guardians was fought by father, Will Crooks, and one or two others. In spite of the fact that all the learning and all the eminence were on the other side, the unlettered ones proved their case up to the hilt and the offenders were cleared out. Father always remarked on the alacrity with which the old Local Government Board would send down inspectors and auditors to investigate matters whenever complaints reached Whitehall that Boards of Guardians were dealing with the poor in a too generous manner. He compared such sprightliness with the leisurely manner in which complaints against higher officers were investigated.

In 1906 another enquiry was held into the work of the Poplar Board of Guardians. On this occasion a complaint had been made by the local Ratepayers' Protection Association that bribery and corruption flourished, that the members of the Board feasted

and drank at the public expense, that money had been spent recklessly in building the Poplar Poor Law schools at Shenfield (for the very details of which father was personally responsible and proud of), that (the old story) paupers were being pampered both inside and outside the workhouse, and workmen paid for doing nothing. After weeks of public sittings Mr. J. S. Davy, the Local Government Board's Inspector, who conducted the enquiry, issued his report. He had found a certain amount of petty corruption among a section of the Board, some unwise drinking of beer after meetings of the workhouse committee.

The bulk of the report, however, condemned the Board for its general extravagance where the actual relief of the poor was concerned, and went to the extent of comparing Poplar's school with Eton and Harrow to the detriment of the latter. Father, of course, was delighted by this criticism of the school. Out of the twenty-four members of the Board only seven or eight were "Labour" and of them only two were Socialists. But the Socialists received the blame not only for the policy (which they gladly accepted) but for every glass of beer wrongfully consumed, and every penny (and they were pitifully few) irregularly come by, whether the transgressors were Liberals, Tories, or Socialists.

The Inspector's most damaging criticism was that the general result of the Board's policy of outdoor relief was to subsidise the low wages paid in the borough and to encourage the system of casual

labour. But father and his colleagues were faced with the actual victims of sweating and casual labour; so they just fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and gave shelter to the destitute.

The Inspector concluded his report with the following paragraphs, which prove that although, in the view of the Socialists he was a narrow-minded bigot, he was fair-minded and generous personally towards those whose policy he despised and condemned:

Mr. Crooks and Mr. Lansbury came on the Board of Guardians as representatives of the Labour Party in the year 1893, and since then they appear to have had the support of both the ratepayers and of the Guardians. It is true that only ten of the twenty-four Guardians are what is termed "labour men," but the views of the leaders have dominated the whole Board. Mr. Lansbury explains this by saying that he and Mr. Crooks "overawed the other Guardians by their sweet reasonableness."

While Mr. Crooks and Mr. Lansbury were directing their policy, the evidence shows only too clearly that some of their colleagues have been guilty of misconduct in relation to the management of the workhouse, and that, to say the least of it, there has been a great want of business capacity in dealing with the contracts. The two Guardians named are busy men, holding a number of offices which entail continuous work, and naturally would not have time, even if they had the inclination, for doing the routine work of managing an institution like the Poplar Workhouse. Neither the Municipal Alliance nor any single witness made the slightest imputation on their personal integrity or on that of some of the other Guardians. They neither ate nor drank with

the workhouse officials, and they suggested to the Local Government Board more than once that the contracts should be altogether taken out of the hands of the Guardians. Whether this resulted from their general views as to the management of the poor law in London or because they had misgivings as to the working of the tender system within their own Union is not clear, but it is most conclusive evidence that they at all events derived no personal profit from the existing system.

## VIII

### THE PEOPLE AND THE PARKS

FATHER is seventy-five years old and has just completed a half-century of useful public and private work. Even so it is quite likely that his most important work may be done in the days that lie immediately ahead. But so far it is certain that his most enduring work was accomplished long before the public at large knew anything about him, before the popular press recognised in him and his work an object worthy of exploitation. He was a revolutionary social democrat before one worker in a thousand troubled his head about such a modest step as labour representation in Parliament and on local governing bodies. He was a whole-hearted supporter of woman's suffrage, and lost his seat in Parliament for the cause, when the mere mention of the words "votes for women" caused roars of incredulous laughter among the majority of men (and women) of all classes. He denounced emigration to the colonies fifty years ago when imperialists were putting it forward (as they do to-day) as a cure for unemployment at home.

He was a free trader when the policy of protection swept the country after the Boer War, and a

“pro-Boer” when the masses, spoon-fed by Rudyard Kipling and the jingo press thought the Boers were a gang of unwashed, illiterate savages. He was a pacifist during the long years of international carnage, when christians, atheists, socialists, tories, rich men, poor men, beggarmen, and thieves united in their endeavours to exterminate one another. A collection of causes more heterodox and more depressingly unpopular in their day could hardly be imagined. Add to them that he was the originator and principal exponent of what came to be known as “Poplarism”—an epithet used to indicate waste, incompetence, and the giving to the poor with a lavish hand of the money of their thrifty rate-paying neighbours—and later on a whole-hearted supporter of the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik régime, and you have a political record admirably calculated to render a man thoroughly disliked.

When Ramsay MacDonald offered him a place in the Cabinet with the position of First Commissioner of Works, father thought more of the work he might do and the influence he might be able to employ as a cabinet minister than of the actual administrative work of his department. But a few weeks of close association with those who really controlled policy and expenditure in the Cabinet must have convinced him that nothing on the grand scale, nothing vital or revolutionary, would ever be attempted or done; indeed that nothing could possibly be done without the sanction of such frigid Liberal reactionaries as Sir John Simon and Sir Herbert

Samuel, upon whom the government depended for its day to day existence.

These considerations doubtless rendered the non-political practical work of his department all the more attractive; but he would be the first to agree that however useful and popular such works might be, they involved no questions of principle or policy, and might have been accomplished, given the necessary grit, energy, and enthusiasm, by any Liberal or Tory. It remains a fact, however, that such qualities are rarely employed in the doing of the smaller jobs. It was father's observance of Carlyle's injunction, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might", that endeared him to news writers and readers throughout the land.

Generally speaking cabinet ministers shine, if they shine at all, when heavy pronouncements are due to be made on foreign debts, international peace, disarmament, re-armament, the Gold Standard, and other matters concerning which no one ever agrees and nothing effective is ever done. Unlike his chief, father never flew from place to place as though the earth would stop rotating if he remained in one place for a week; he just started to make the London parks fit for children to play in. To him in his capacity of First Commissioner of Works, the Serpentine was more important than the Adriatic, Regent's Park nearer to the heart than the Antipodes, London greater than Locarno.

He became known as His Majesty's First Commissioner of Good Works. The Earl of Lytton,



presiding at the annual meeting of the State Children's Association, went so far as to suggest that an office of State Godfather to all State children should be created; he said:

I would like to see Mr. George Lansbury put in that office, so that all children would associate with him the same joys as they associate with Father Christmas.

His works secured notice from the Editor of *Time and Tide* (20th September, 1929):

#### MR. LANSBURY AT WORK.

It has usually been understood that the First Commissioner of Works is a Minister with few duties, and when Mr. Lansbury was appointed to that office it was announced that he would be able to help Mr. Thomas in dealing with problems of employment. For the last month or so, the public has been aware of him as perhaps the busiest member of the Government. His first hints of schemes for changes in the London parks were not taken seriously. His mention of an all-British Lido was, even in the heat wave, a journalistic joke. But, if Mr. Lansbury is an incorrigible dreamer, there are signs that he is one whose pertinacity makes dreams come true. There are difficulties in his way, but interviews with him show that he has foreseen them. He is not expecting a transformation scene to follow a wave of the wand. He makes his tours of inspection; announces forthcoming consultations with public health authorities and police; appeals for financial aid to the generous—and obtains it. When he speaks confidently of getting money out of Mr. Snowden, one thinks of the Hague conference; yet in all probability he is right. Mr. Lansbury is one of those Ministers whose names should have a permanent place in

history, and, especially, in books of history for children. He will be remembered, it may be, as the First Commissioner for Good Works.

He delivered a short address by wireless explaining his ideas for making London brighter. The result was a flood of letters from every part of the English-speaking world. From America, especially, he received praise from rich and poor. A pathetic feature of his postbag was the number of Englishmen who wrote from Canada. Father's talk of London and its parks stirred memories of home and aroused the desire to return.

A letter from Woodstock, Ontario, begins:

DEAR COMRADE,

Me and my dear wife have just had the extreme pleasure of listening in on our radio to your voice and when I tell you it was many years ago since I heard your voice last you will realise our pleasure. Well, comrade, let me explain that I am one of your converts to the socialist ranks in those tough early days in Northampton when the late Bobby Reid used to be hustled from the steps on the market square. . . . we have lived in London and well we know the boon of those open spaces to the poor. . . . We feel all the better for your air address. . . . I sure ponder over some of our stormy meetings, but the result has been worth the effort.

Another from Spring Lake, Michigan:

DEAR GEORGE,

For that is the way I like to express my feelings. It is with the greatest pleasure I am writing this letter to

you. It is funny to say that I know you but you don't know me. I was born in Poplar, in Lodore Street, and have been to several of your meetings at the Town Hall. . . . I wanted to hear if your voice sounded the same, believe me it was just yourself. . . . When you spoke about St. James's Park, Tower of London, and Deal, with its old Roman roads, it brought back memories as I have seen all them places. . . .

### One from Chicago:

I was hoping before you had got through your talk you would have said something about the parks and open spaces in the East and South of London. You spoke of St. James's Park and Kensington Gardens, but I wanted to be reminded of Victoria Park, Hampstead Heath and Peckham Rye.

Here in Chicago we resemble London in that we have some very fine parks, but we also have vast areas like the slums of which you spoke in London, where the sun and air seldom penetrate and there must be many thousands of children who never have seen the green sod.

I wish we had someone here occupying the position of sufficient power to do the work which you are doing in Britain. . . .

### Another from a University Professor in Buffalo:

We were particularly pleased to find such frequent mention of the spiritual aspects of social work in your talk. So often men's daily lives are regulated purely from the material point of view that it is indeed refreshing to hear references to some higher plane of thought.

## One from Los Angeles:

We thank God for you, George, and especially for the splendid way in which you are fulfilling your high office. . . . In this country one longs to be again under the flag of the dear old country. . . .

And finally, one from a secondary school teacher in Ontario:

I want to express my appreciation of your address. It had the sympathetic touch of one who loved birds and flowers and green grass and trees, not only for themselves, but for the part they can play in the life of men and women, boys and girls, and also as revelations of the goodness of our God.

. . . . .

Sometimes his plans gave rise to resentment. For example, the provision of the children's boating lake in Regent's Park, adjacent to Hanover and York Gates, caused a furore among the middle class families occupying the flats and houses in the neighbourhood. Their children and nurses had had that part of London to themselves ever since those spacious terraces had been built; in fact the park itself was an amenity which they had taken into account when leasing their houses and flats. Was it fair then that "paddy pools", running tracks, swings, see-saws, and other contraptions should be provided free of charge so that ragamuffins from the slums of Camden Town and St. Pancras might share the spaciousness, the cleanliness and the fresh air of the west side of the park? Father

received deputations and letters on the subject, but was not deflected from his purpose.

No doubt those who had regarded father as a dangerous revolutionary were delighted to observe these harmless activities. Even his friends in the Cabinet were probably glad to see his energies directed into such channels. Philip Snowden, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, must have felt, let us say, one grain of comfort by reason of the fact that practically the whole of the cost of providing these amenities was defrayed by philanthropists.

Millionaires seemed willing and happy to fork out a few thousands and prove for themselves how much more blessed it is to give than to receive. Most of us would be only too glad to prove this for ourselves, but for the fact that in order to give on the grand scale most of us have to receive first. Father was properly grateful for these crumbs that fell from the tables of the very rich, but he would have been happier by far if he could have given the poor a place at the table itself. I am sure the generosity of the philanthropist never disarmed him to such an extent that he forgot his socialist teaching that the rich will do anything for the poor except get off their backs. "The poor are poor because they are robbed."

## IX

### HOME AND PRISON

Nobody thinks of father as a good business man, because he never succeeded in making money for himself or his children. He never regarded making money as a worthy occupation. Nevertheless, had he served his own interests with half the zeal he employed in the service of the people he might to-day be able to contemplate a bank balance instead of a tiresome and fluctuating overdraft. As an individual he is extravagant but his extravagance is always for the benefit of the other fellow. Some people would call him reckless. For example, some twenty years ago he actually borrowed a hundred pounds from the bank in order to lend it to somebody, neither relation nor friend, who wanted to start a business.

Mother was always long-suffering and patient—I think she had known the man she was marrying and had been prepared for almost everything. But this transaction aroused her just wrath, for we were always hard put to it to scrape together lump sums for rates, rent, coal bills, and small but regular school fees. Surprisingly enough, the money was repaid, mother's guns spiked, and father provided with a

powerful text on the integrity of borrowers and the goodness of man in general. Of course it would wipe out from his memory the hundreds of minor loans or gifts made to all and sundry in response to some more or less credible hard luck story. To the rest of the family, all young and gullible, this one just man loomed big on the horizon as a kind of saviour washing away the sins of the financial world.

Like most prominent men, father has been the recipient of thousands of begging letters, but unlike many prominent men, his very door has always been assailed, not to say besieged, by those who need help of one kind or another. One can hardly imagine a down-at-heel unemployed worker knocking at Mr. Baldwin's door to ask for a night's lodging; nor would one of Sir Austen Chamberlain's constituents hit on the idea of seeking out his member of Parliament in his home in order to raise the wind to the tune of ten shillings or a pound for the rent. For one thing, they would probably be met at the door by a butler—and kept outside. I have seen father irritated beyond words by the appearance at his street door, opened of course by mother, his daughter, or himself, of men who represented themselves as having walked all the way from Glasgow or Liverpool in search of work and who only wanted a couple of shillings for a night's lodging. His irritation would be due to the obvious hunger and need of the applicant, to the weakness of the story and to his own



*[Reproduced by permission of Barratt, Fleet Street, London]*

FATHER AND MOTHER LEAVING BOW STREET, 1913

He was ordered to find recognisances to keep the peace or go to prison for six months. He went on hunger-strike and served six days. He was sentenced for speaking in support of the women's militant tactics in the Suffrage campaign.



complete inability to do anything really tangible to help.

A further cause of anxiety was the fact that his slender purse was not equal to the strain which these constant payments made upon it. But one thing would turn irritation into wrath and that was an application by one of these itinerants for a small "loan". To the applicant for the loan of a pound he would say: "You know jolly well you can't pay me back so take this five bob, and get yourself something to eat but for goodness' sake don't say you'll pay me back."

Occasionally a local costermonger, very much down on his luck, would turn up for a loan of five pounds with which to go to the fish or fruit market; and if the money was available it would be lent, and as often as not paid back within two or three days.

Father does most of his reading and writing in the front room of his house at 39 Bow Road. His desk faces the window, and while he tackles the many political and personal problems that face him daily, the rattle and roar of trams, buses, lorries and steam-wagons goes on. He literally sees the stream of life pass beneath his window. Children pass to and from school; men and women pass to and from their work. Bow Road is a veritable "old man river", along which pass bales, barrels, bundles and packages of all kinds of merchandise to which Paul Robeson might do justice in another song.

For him this is a minor pageant, a humble Lord Mayor's Show, which gives him inspiration, courage and hope. No wonder he talks of "the common people". He belongs to them entirely, and every thought, every action, whether expressed in the House of Commons or at the street corner, is formed and moulded by their influence.

Many members of Parliament take good care not to live near their constituencies. They employ an agent to do all the interviewing and, outside the House of Commons, manage to live a normal life untroubled by daily and hourly callers. Such members rely upon reports for much of their knowledge of the conditions in which their people live, of the hardships involved in alterations of unemployment relief, or of the detailed working of the Means Test. Father, however, spends most of his mornings in Bow, and hears daily many a story direct from the victims of economy and efficiency.

If it is said of him that his stark "close-up" view of unemployment and poverty disables him from maintaining that clear sight of the whole problem so important from the expert economists' point of view, it can also be said that those who think only in terms of facts and figures supplied by the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Health, know only a fraction of the problem.

Mr. Neville Chamberlain, devoid of sentiment and a model of equanimity, may issue statistics from Whitehall showing that slums are disappearing, that people are relinquishing the dole and that

the world is a splendid place for everybody. But his self-satisfaction might be shaken if he took a room in Poplar or Limehouse and heard at first hand the stories of those who are being hit by the more rigorous methods of administering the Poor Law and the Means Test under his department.

. . . . .

If George Lansbury seldom applied his talents to business on his own behalf, such indifference did not extend to public affairs. The best piece of business he ever did was to lead the members of the Poplar Borough Council into prison—the men to Brixton and the women to Holloway. The idea had occurred to him and his colleagues that a few weeks' sojourn away from the heat and turmoil of a heedless and unsatisfactory world might draw public attention to a great public scandal which nobody but the victims ever wanted to hear about.

The scandal concerned the very poor and the very rich of the Metropolitan boroughs, and this business visit to His Majesty's prison of a few Poplar councillors resulted in Poplar becoming richer by more than five hundred thousand pounds a year and in somebody becoming poorer by a like amount. In domestic matters governments will stand out till the crack of doom against reason and justice but will fall like ninepins before a loud hullabaloo or a parade of wooden soldiers. Let us consider briefly the particular hullabaloo that arose in London in the year 1921.

London consists of twenty-eight boroughs plus the area administered by the City of London Corporation. Some of these boroughs (such as Poplar and Stepney) are known as poor boroughs, and some (such as Westminster and Kensington) are known as rich boroughs. The City of London Corporation administers the richest area of all. Before 1921 the duty and the cost of maintaining the destitute of Poplar devolved upon the board of guardians whose sole source of revenue was the local rates.

Apart from factory owners and a few shop-keepers, the mass of Poplar people were poor, and thousands had to be maintained out of the rates. Hence Poplar rates were extremely high, sometimes rising to 23s. or more in the £. Apart from a few minor though specially disgraceful slums, the majority of the people of Westminster and Kensington were rich, and some were very rich. It was a delightful arrangement for them because, rich as they were, they only had to maintain a kind of sample of the poor of London in their borough whereas the Poplar people, poor as they were, had to maintain the bulk. Consequently, Westminster rates were low, sometimes less than 10s. in the pound.

Naturally enough, this anomaly had been recognised by the poorer boroughs for many years, and a constant demand for equalization of the rates of London went up. The demand took the form of public meetings, speeches in Parliament, deputations to the Local Government Board and afterwards to

the Ministry of Health. All this was very proper and very constitutional.

The newspapers if they noticed these happenings at all usually pointed to the extravagance of the poorer boroughs in their dealings with the sick and the aged poor, and denounced the iniquity of those who apparently wanted to be generous with other people's money. They stigmatised the whole agitation as "Poplarism" and the desire for equal rates as a disease called "squandermania". Successive Governments looked upon the matter as beneath contempt. No minister would win any medals by tackling this thorny problem. So nothing was done and point given to the current popular sentimental ditty "'tis the poor that help the poor, when poverty knocks at the door."

By 1921, the situation of the Labour Council of the Poplar Borough had become critical. Over every meeting of the finance committee hung, like a sword of Damocles, the threat of bankruptcy. Heavy rates, deficits, bank overdrafts and the increasing demands made upon the borough funds by the guardians by reason of the ever-increasing unemployment and destitution in the locality caused the councillors sleepless nights and nightmare days.

Not only had they to pay for local services, they had also to pay away large sums of money every half year to the London County Council, the Metropolitan Police, the Metropolitan Asylums Board, and other central authorities to defray the cost of

centrally administered services such as education, main roads, drainage, etc.

A day at last dawned on which a strong beam of light seemed to clarify the atmosphere. Charlie Sumner, one of the common people, rose up in his place and asked what would happen if Poplar refused to pay over the money required by these central bodies. From that moment the doom of the reactionaries was as good as sealed. Lawyers were consulted and it was ascertained that unless we did our duty and paid over the money we should all eventually find ourselves in prison.

Without more ado it was moved, seconded and carried (with only six dissentients—they being non-Labour members of the Council) that the Poplar Council should levy a rate sufficient to pay for its own local services, leaving the central bodies to get their share as best they could.

The Council was no "one-man" show. Father was, of course, prominent in all the discussions, and the virtual leader. But there were forty-two Labour members, all eager and belligerent, and quite determined to go to prison rather than permit a recognized injustice to continue.

The air was electrical, pious resolutions a thing of the past. If public meetings were to be held they should be called not to voice protests but to reinforce action already decided upon. The case between the council and the central authorities proceeded by the usual easy stages through the Law Courts. Writs and affidavits were the order of the day.

Time was on the side of the Poplar folk, whereas the central bodies were anxious to get their money, and were themselves having to raise loans to meet pressing obligations.

Whenever the case was called huge demonstrations were organised and thousands marched from Poplar to the Law Courts. After many weeks of hearings and appeals the councillors were ordered individually to go back to Poplar and levy the rate necessary to pay for the central London services. One or two of the appeal judges admitted that Poplar's case was morally good but that the law, whatever it demanded, must be obeyed. Ordinary people, even if councillors must not take the law into their own hands; they must work for change in the usual constitutional manner.

The argument that constitutional methods had been tried for decades without success did not appeal to the judges, the law and justice being two different things. The "common people" of Poplar did not understand this. Nevertheless, unless the councillors obeyed the Court they must go to prison and remain there for contempt until they agreed to do as they were told. Thus it was that George Lansbury and his colleagues, including the writer of this book found themselves in prison.

We remained in Brixton prison with our twenty-seven comrades for about six weeks, during which the Government made many unofficial promises to deal with the question of the rates of London on the lines of our demand if only we would first purge

our contempt of Court by levying the rate. Father was too wily to be caught in this way. Most of us took the line that the Government having allowed us to get into prison through their neglect should find some means of getting us out again. Besides we were beginning to find prison comfortable if not delectable.

Our prison days were exciting and tedious in turn. Father himself would probably have preferred to take things quietly instead of causing a lot of bother for everybody in the prison. Poor Jack Scurr, a very sick man at the time, was somewhat like-minded. But the rest of us decided to make ourselves as objectionable as possible to those for whom prison discipline was a matter of grave concern.

Needless to say, both father and Scurr supported us in all our misdoings. There was hardly a prison rule we did not break. In the first few days the warders tried hard to treat us like ordinary criminals, locking us in our cells for twenty-four hours, and ordering us to march yards apart in the prison yard in single file. They failed. We just strolled about the exercise yards arguing and debating and causing great disaffection amongst the other prisoners.

After three days all pretence of discipline had gone, prison regulations were scrapped, and we became the virtual masters of Brixton prison.

Special food was sent in for us, the Town Clerk and many borough officials, (including the medical officer of the borough) came every day and enabled us to conduct the ordinary business of the Poplar



Council in one of the Governor's rooms. Footballs and football boots were sent in to the younger ones by supporters outside. We practised assiduously and issued a challenge to a band of Sinn Fieners who spent the days playing in another part of the prison. The match didn't take place, luckily for us.

The prison doctor was distracted, especially when father's health seemed to be breaking down. Two or three of us were genuinely ill, but one and all reported sick every morning and insisted on a thorough examination in case we had some hidden illness for which, we insisted, we would hold the governor responsible. Warders were transferred and reduced in rank for bullying and threatening prisoners with personal violence. The place became a pandemonium and our imprisonment degenerated into a farce.

Outside the prison, more exciting things were happening. Enormous processions marched with bands and banners round the prison walls. Leather-lunged orators addressed the crowds from the upper windows of houses facing the prison. We could see them plainly over the prison wall, and they could see us peering between the bars of our cell windows. We all sang the Red Flag, the Internationale, and other socialist songs, shouted greetings to each other over the wall, and as a rule father would wind up the demonstrations with one of his rousing speeches which could be heard throughout the prison.

One of the most important rules is that prisoners must not talk at all or look out of their cell windows.

One night, when father had just finished his speech, someone outside shouted "What's young Edgar doing with himself all this time" (he meant the writer); so even I had to heave myself up to the window and give verbal proof that I was still alive if not kicking.

The necessity for getting us out of prison now presented itself to Sir Alfred Mond (afterwards Lord Melchett)—the Minister of Health—as an even more urgent task than levying the rates of Poplar. The ordinary run of prisoners (poor wretches in for debt, most of them) were getting restive. The Governor complained to us, and doubtless to the Home Office, of the difficulty of maintaining prison discipline among the habitués with such a group as ours on his hands.

After a lot of negotiating and wirepulling that seemed to us interminable, a satisfactory legal document was drawn up enabling us to walk out of prison in the sure knowledge that the reform which thirty years of constitutional agitation had failed to bring about would at last be effected. Stepney, Greenwich, Woolwich, St. Pancras, and every poor borough of London benefited financially by many hundreds of thousands of pounds by our action, and Labour administration of the Poor Law in those areas was correspondingly simplified.

## X

### THE SOUTHERN CROSS, AND MOTHER

THREE years before I was born, father and mother packed up their scanty belongings, took their savings out of the bank, said good-bye to their friends and relations and emigrated to Australia. Possibly life was not exactly a bed of roses for either of them in Whitechapel in the 1880's. He had been earning a reasonable living in various occupations. He had been partner with his brother in a two-man coal-trimming concern, and manager of a coffee shop. But definitely the life left much to be desired, and both father and mother took to dreaming of distant lands, the more distant the better. They thought of Australia, studied the emigration advertisements, pictured vast expanses of territory occupied by pleasing flocks of sheep amiably offering flesh to the hungry and wool to the cold and naked. They visualised for themselves a quiet and happy life, removed from the horror of slums and the sweated labour of competitive industry as pursued in the old world.

In the innocence of their hearts Australia was the promised land, flowing with milk and honey, where

hard work and high thinking would bring contentment and peace. It was to be for them a new earth and a new heaven. The very constellations of the northern hemisphere must have seemed tame and uninteresting as their minds dwelt on the glory of the "Southern Cross"; shining over their land of heart's desire. They were only a little over twenty years of age.

Until mother's death in the spring of 1933, some remnant of the romance and enthusiasm of those wonderful anticipatory days still remained with them both. The "Southern Cross" still held for them a thrill, as it might thrill us younger ones if only it was a sort of "Southern Belle" or "Blue Train" speeding to some surer if nearer heaven like Mentone, Naples, or Sicily.

With father the romance lingers still, reminding him of days when he and she faced a hard and pitiless world with little more than stout hearts and the will to achieve happiness and peace. As things turned out, they never did achieve peace, but of happiness that goes with comradeship in great and noble work they had their full share.

Alas that grim reality should always follow the fairest dreams! "Heaven," as father is fond of quoting "is here or nowhere," yet their dreams were not easily shattered, and survived many premonitory shocks as they journeyed to the fabled shore.

The first break in the journey was made at Plymouth and the night was spent in a Plymouth lodging house. Sleep being out of the question,

they occupied themselves hunting vermin of various kinds. They consoled themselves with the thought that there would be plenty of time for sleep on the boat. There was indeed plenty of time, but to sleep something more than mere time or inclination is needed. It was a wretched old cargo boat specially converted for emigrant traffic. The hold was partitioned off into a large number of boxes with no human accommodation of any kind, allowing barely room for the occupants to lie down like cattle. As father said: "To get into bed was like putting yourself into your own coffin."

Half-starved and even then seasick, the whole boat-load of emigrants suffered together as it is only possible to suffer on the sea. Mother was very ill indeed for the whole of the journey and at one time it was thought she would never recover. Father himself suffered less than most because he was then, and always has been, what is called a "good sailor". This sometimes means nothing more than a willingness to go on living while everyone else wants to die.

He found the whole journey very interesting. He went ashore at every stopping place, and at Colombo, having the notion that religion started with Christianity (a revealing admission coming from the head boy of the old dame's school), was surprised at the beauty and antiquity of some of the religious houses and temples of Ceylon.

However, if the journey itself was a nightmare, they told each other that it must end some time, and

Australia was waiting at the other end. Hardly had they put a foot on the soil of the Commonwealth when they found themselves up against something almost as bad as seasickness. There was no work. Employers didn't want men and women with families to support. Unemployment was more acute than in "the old country." There were the usual charitable organisations to help the victims, mostly with advice and letters of recommendation with which to pester somebody else.

Their first night in Australia was spent in an Emigrant's Home. It was rat-ridden and filthy. As father said: "Had I been a person who took drink I would have gone out after seeing my wife in bed and got gloriously drunk." After weeks of effort, he secured work. It was stone-breaking. It was also heart-breaking. The best comment on the nature of this work is that one of his first actions as a guardian of the poor was to get stone-breaking abolished as a test for able-bodied unemployed men.

Then he worked as a meat carrier for a slaughterhouse, and afterwards as a farmworker under agreement. The farm was eighty miles up country from Brisbane and it was here that the *coup de grâce* was given to their dreams of peace and happiness under Australian skies. His wages were to be forty pounds a year, but, unlike Oliver Goldsmith's worthy parson he could not be said to be "passing rich" on that sum, for after working like a nigger for three or four months he found he owed his employer quite a considerable sum on account of supplies.

In spite of the agreement he got away from this farm somehow and took a job as a parcels delivery van driver. This job lasted no longer than the others, and after trying his hand at milking cows, mowing oats, levelling the ground for the Sydney Cricket Club where test matches are now played, the whole family were glad when a remittance arrived from home enabling them to return to London and face once again the more familiar rigours of the old world.

Those days in Australia must have been a nightmare to father; but what they were to mother cannot be imagined. There were three children to manage, two of their own (very young) and one of father's younger brothers. Yet his chief recollections are the very few worth while things that happened to them, the odd little things that soften the hardest blows and 'spice the dullest days.

For example, he came to my house at Mill Hill one day in 1932 and, of course, went straight to the room where my two-year-old twins were. He sat on an innocent-looking stool and much to the delight of the boys it began to play out its two little tunes—"The Anvil Chorus" and (strange partners in melody) "In the gloaming". I could see that the second tune, tinkled out in the touching manner of the German "musical box" had affected him deeply.

After a safe passage of time he recalled in a diffident manner the occasion when he had last heard "In the gloaming". It was Christmas Eve, and he was

out with his team of horses delivering goods and parcels to farms and homesteads in the Australian Bush and had been surprised when about to open a farmyard gate by the sound of a girl's voice singing this very song. She was quite a young girl, and the evening was beautiful—he remembered that the moon was there and no doubt the Southern Cross was there too, doing its best to deceive once again. Father was no gallant but a serious husband and father, so he delivered the parcel and drove off.

Father was never one for "affairs" but I am sure that in a curious manner that girl is still young and beautiful in his mind, and I am sentimental enough to wish that she might know it. She would be seventy or thereabouts. A cynic might say that the place must have been pretty dull if one trifling incident such as this could remain in the memory after fifty years. But who can say which are the trifling things and which the great ones?

Mother's recollections of Australia were many and varied. Often I have heard her scolding the girls at home for grumbling over the domestic work (which, whatever she might say, was in our house very hard work indeed), reminding them of the days when she did the washing, helped with the farm work, reared three or four children and did all the cooking, under the broiling heat of the Australian sun.

In the bush, her kitchen range was a gypsy's tripod and pot, but she used to say that you could fry eggs and bacon or grill a steak on the rocks



outside the "humpy". She brought water from a filthy stream five hundred yards away and had to boil every drop before it was fit to drink. She also carried up the water to the farm-house where the employer lived, and boiled it for his family too.

In passing, it may be mentioned that in after years, we boys did not escape our share of the domestic work. We also grumbled and were scolded too. It is a fiction that only girls do domestic work. When we were old enough, that is from eight years and upwards, we had to do our share of the work of the house, the girls being expected to give more attention to the babies, who were generally there or on the way. My brother's job was to clean all the windows of the house (inside and outside) leaving no smears and going into all the corners, and to "get" the errands. Getting the errands was, of course, a colloquialism—or worse—meaning taking the basket to the market place and buying the day's provisions.

My own special work was cleaning the knives and forks and boots and shoes—all of them—and woe betide me if I left any metal-polish between the prongs of the forks. It would surely be extruded on father's cheese (he had a proletarian habit of mixing his supper cheese with salt, mustard, vinegar and pepper and mashing it into a kind of soft pudding with a fork), and then "the balloon would go up."

Mother's life in Australia, instead of giving her what we considered the right idea, had apparently

convinced her that hard work was good for young people. We could grumble and make feeble attempts at evasion but she was adamant.

There is a modern song in which the chorus goes:—

Put your troubles through the mangle,  
Like mother does on washing day.

I always get the heartache, almost the backache whenever this song comes over the wireless. It will be out-of-date by the time this book is published—and I am glad. It brings back vividly those washing-days of long ago when sending clothes to the laundry was hardly heard of and mangling meant not merely putting through such reasonable and amenable garments as cami-knickers and pyjamas, but sheets, blankets, window curtains, quilts and other large and bulky articles.

It recalls like a stab at the heart a picture of mother, hands crinkled and white by the action of soda, water, and soap, face dripping with perspiration, digging and pounding masses of clothes in the boiling copper or wash-tub, wringing them out first roughly in her hands, and then passing them on to us to “put through the mangle”; and if strength failed us, seizing the handle herself and with the strength of a lion and a lot more courage, forcing the work through.

By comparison, how sweet and easy life seemed on those rarer days when only lighter articles such as babies’ bibs, napkins, table-cloths and pillow

cases had to be mangled. We loved "turning the mangle" then. Dinner (midday, of course) perhaps of cheese and lettuce with sugar and vinegar and lots of bread and a little butter tasted better than table d'hôte at the Savoy. Soused mackerel was also a favourite food with us, because it was cheap and the fish, if bought fresh and cooked immediately, was nice to eat. If cheese was scarce, father had a well-worn joke, which never failed to raise a laugh, to the effect that we must eat the bread and smell the cheese. The first time I heard it I took it literally, taking everything he said for gospel. Alas!

On these easier days, the afternoon school-bell seemed to toll with a less compelling note as we loitered on our way; the anæmic music of the old German band in their faded uniforms lined up on the kerb seemed charged with a sweet melancholy. Life was good after all and mother would only have the ironing to do when we returned from school at tea-time.

Father has made thousands of speeches during his fifty years of public life, extolling the patience and virtue of the workers. But though she is always in his mind and heart, he seldom talks about one particular worker who in her day played a great and noble part in his life, and by enthusiasm, courage, thrift, skill in the management of household affairs, and above all, capacity for taking a back seat without fretting or nagging, made it possible for him to play his part in the life of the country—I mean Elizabeth Jane Lansbury.

She worked harder by far, not only for home and family, but also for the Cause, than many of those who more definitely belong to the working class. Father is only too well aware of her, and his own, sacrifice. But her death in the Spring of 1933, during the most tumultuous and strenuous days of his over-active life robbed him (shall I say, "for life at least"?) of the companionship of a serene and peaceful old age. Before her end the "little cottage in the country" had been mooted many times; but with them, as with most of us, the "living happily ever after" had to run concurrently with the killing of dragons and the slaying of giants—or not at all.

Well, they did live happily, if not peacefully or easefully. Describing in his autobiography<sup>1</sup> his earlier unpaid work first for Liberalism and later for Socialism he says:

The only person who has paid for this work is my wife, so if any thanks are due to me for this sacrifice of time and energy, the thanks are due to her and no one else, because she has borne the loneliness of life without any regret, feeling sure the work we were trying to do was for the good of mankind.

and later on:

When at work in the mill at home it was my custom, directly my work was finished on Saturday, to leave London for the provinces, do a meeting on Saturday night, three on Sunday, and catch the night train back, ready to start

<sup>1</sup> *My Life*, by George Lansbury (Constable).

work at seven o'clock on Monday morning. My train would land me at the London terminus at all hours—3, 3.30, 4, or 5 o'clock in the morning. There was no money for cabs, no buses or trains, so often it was my lot to walk to Bow from King's Cross and Euston. Always when arriving home at these early hours my wife would be waiting up with a first-class breakfast and a nice big fire. How she managed things was a mystery; our family kept growing, but my wages were for a long time only thirty shillings a week. We were very happy in those days. Somehow our hearts kept young and the world seemed young. We worked and looked for a future which would be bright for us and others. Whenever we had to make a decision as to our future we both thought only of what was good for the movement. We never stopped to argue about personal advancement. Whatever political position has come my way, has come without any seeking by either of us, and so these early years of propaganda and hard manual work may be counted among the very happiest of our married life, which is rapidly approaching fifty years.

The Labour Movement as known to-day is a growth of thirty or forty years. In that period Socialism has developed from childhood into full-grown manhood. A Socialist government is a certainty within ten years, though whether it will be socialist in the Fascist and Nazi sense, or in the Russian sense, remains to be seen. It depends upon the capacity of the workers to keep control of their own organisations and of Parliament. If anyone wants to know something of the spirit that has made the growth of Socialism possible, let him read father's own book.

There have been many like him and it is in the nature of things that most of them have been drawn into the movement of public affairs that spelt progress and life.

There is nothing unusual in the spectacle of a woman, poor, and what is called respectable, having children and rearing them, and contending against the practical difficulties of life; the world is full of them, but usually their breadwinner is with them, not only in spirit but in fact, bringing solace in the quiet evenings for the disappointments and troubles of the day. Mother had to forego a very large part of this companionship.

Father writes of the long week-ends spent away from his home. There were also the long evenings after work during which mother wrestled with a difficult and sometimes turbulent family, with father miles away lecturing and debating on Socialism and public affairs generally, or sitting for hours on committees and councils fighting the battles of the poor.

It would be untrue to say that she never grumbled—of course she did, being human—but in a moment a few words would put everything right, and a dozen, twenty, or even fifty kisses, with the whole family gaping at them (where could we go?—there was only one living room and that was the kitchen) would signalise the “all clear” and the good work for Socialism could go on.

It is a happy thought that in the last ten years of her life she had him with her at home all through

the sessions of Parliament, that she often went with him to theatres, cinemas and for motor rides; and even travelled to Russia and America with him. During those years I know that they made up to each other in love, companionship and happiness much that had been sacrificed earlier in their lives for the Cause.

## XI

### “VISITING THE SINS OF THE FATHER”

IF thanks were due to mother for the work which father did, I think some recognition is due to his children too. We didn't exactly suffer, but no one can deny that we had a lot to put up with. For one thing we always seemed to be on the unpopular side, though luckily we were sufficiently Victorian and christian to believe that it was better to suffer for one's beliefs than not to suffer at all. But it was all very difficult, especially when we had to inform the Board School teacher that we had no farthings to put in the collection to relieve the victims of the Indian famine because our father thought there wasn't any real famine at all but only an artificial one brought about by the unjust taxes of the British Government.

I personally, at the age of eight or ten, found this a bit of a mouthful, and once wept bitterly because nobody would give me the farthing that would pass me into the ranks of the happy ones whose orthodox fathers had made the sacrifice. The teachers knew little about the Indian famine but a great deal about Clive and Warren-Hastings, about battles and sieges, the Indian Mutiny, and the Black Hole of Calcutta.



We were equally sore-pressed in the days of the Boer War. We were sent to school wearing red rosettes instead of patriotic buttons with photographs of Buller, Roberts, French, Sir George White, and other triumphant brass-hats. The journey to school was sometimes terrifying; often it became a running fight, with the schoolmaster's jeer awaiting us in the class-room.

A milder instance of suffering for father's faith was during the short period in which he gave up church-going and sent us to a local Sunday school run by the Ethical Society. I, personally, had an incurable liking for Holy Writ, and learned by heart all the scripture lessons taught in the Board school. The inevitable result was the presentation of a Bible by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and what a commotion occurred when I asked to be given an alternative book! But I got one. It was called "Sketches of Jewish social life in the time of Christ".

On Sunday afternoons five or six of us children would go with father to Victoria Park, where he would mount the socialist platform and sway the masses while we mooched about on the outskirts of the meeting selling pamphlets and a weekly journal entitled *Justice, the Organ of Social Democracy*. We all knew this to be a great and good work, but how cold and miserable we felt in the winter! More to our liking were the tales of the old soldiers who in those days had equal rights on the parks with religious and political speakers.

Taken all round they were a sorry looking lot, and it was not easy to picture them in their prime standing four-square against England's enemies. But most of them had fought real enemies, the kind we had read about in books—Zulus, Matabeles, Basutos, Hottentots, Indians, Afridis, Dervishes—all savages and as black as your hat. How we gaped, a year or two later, to see in the newspapers a picture of the chief of one of these strange tribes, wearing a shiny top-hat. He had made a special journey to England to pay homage to the Queen. These old soldiers were serious rivals to all but the very best orators.

A prodigy like the "Boy Preacher", a black convert brought from darkest Africa by the Christian Evidence Society to convert the atheists, H. M. Hyndman, or father himself, might be able to hold their crowds, but lesser lights would soon find themselves talking to their own faithful party members and the proverbial stray dog whenever the old soldiers began their threadbare stories.

In particular I remember one who used to take his audience (at a penny per head) into an adjacent field where they might count his assegai wounds. He had twenty-eight of them altogether on various parts of his body. To our chagrin he would not allow young boys to examine any but the two or three wounds on his forearm. Victorian prudishness! They indeed looked vicious enough.

He claimed to have been present at the death of Colonel Burnaby during the battle of Aboukir Wells.

He used to construct a square on the gravel, with matches for soldiers and toy cannons at each corner, to illustrate exactly how it happened. It appeared that he himself almost saved Burnaby's life and sustained most of his wounds on that occasion.

There was another old chap, no doubt a good soldier in his day, a veteran of the Crimea, but a poor story-teller, who could never induce more than two or three to listen to his exploits. It seemed pitiful to me, and long before his tale was told I was fumbling amongst bits of string and marbles in my knickerbocker pockets for a copper. Once I found a farthing and felt rather ashamed, for I could almost feel his rheumy eye watching me and knew he would expect a penny at least. There was no hope of a diversion among the rest of the audience, for it consisted of two or three of my own companions, even less affluent than I. So I proffered the farthing with some mumbled words of apology. He was moved in a grumpy sort of way and said it was better than nothing.

Most of these story-tellers were quite genuine old soldiers, and served to illustrate the generosity of the State in dealing with its defenders. Needless to say our socialist orators took full advantage of the opportunity.

Sometimes I used to sit on the step of the rostrum, and great was my mystification at the shaking and rocking caused by the abject knocking of the knees of the specially nervous speakers. Curiously enough, they were generally the best orators. Father was

always very nervous at the start of a speech, and we were agitated mentally as well as physically by the movements of the platform. Two or three of us would sit on the first step, but heavy as we were could never hold it steady.

After the meeting we would all walk home together for tea, very late and desperately hungry. Frequently father would bring home half a dozen arguing and gesticulating comrades to tea, and this meant that we children had to wait an hour or perhaps two hours before we got ours. Sometimes we didn't get it until the comrades had all trooped out to the evening meeting, where the afternoon racket would be repeated. We would listen impatiently to the argument in the kitchen, or peep through the key-hole, and at last, mad with hunger, one of us would quickly open the door and shout something offensive. This usually had the desired effect.

But if we suffered for our father's beliefs, as children always suffer for their parents' faults and qualities, there were many compensations. For example, there was the first of May—Labour Day. There was a black and white drawing in our front room which had something to do with Labour Day. It was by Walter Crane. Perhaps the reader knows what this means. It depicted a procession of splendid looking young men and women carrying agricultural tools of all sorts, baskets of fruit and vegetables, with children capering around and between their legs as they marched towards the rising sun of Socialism. The sun was only a circle with no body in it.

For myself, as a child of five or six, Walter Crane's drawings left me with a kind of empty feeling; perhaps, if he had filled them in with plentiful splashes of prime colours, my impression would have been healthier. As it was, the general effect was one of unutterable sadness where I believe the artist intended to portray nothing but joy and hope, and the spirit of Merrie England and the Maypole.

What a different affair was May Day itself! This indeed was no black and white drawing. From every part of London branches of trade unions, co-operative societies, socialist parties and all kinds of reformers would congregate on Victoria Embankment, and with banners flying and bands playing march to Hyde Park to demonstrate the solidarity of the workers throughout the world. Judged by the standards of to-day, which has seen the pre-war Pankhurst demonstrations and the masses drawn together by the General Strike, the May Day demonstrations of the 'ninties were puny. But they were real.

And what heartburnings as to the contingents that should march in the van! And how we all-too-English boys from Bow would stare in wonder at the curious cosmopolitan crowd that formed the Stepney and Whitechapel contingent, with their strange clothes, lean and dark faces, their ugly scowls, untidy gait—shuffling along arm in arm, women like men and men like women, chanting their revolutionary songs to strange music in strange

tongues. I wonder whether we ever saw Lenin or Trotsky, Stalin, or Litvinoff in those processions!

Once or twice father managed to get us a lift on top of one of the tiny baker's vans sent by the London Co-operative Society to swell the procession. With huge red rosettes and a big chunk of "Tottenham Cake" in our hands we certainly were, to be modern, "on top of the world". There were always long delays on the Embankment and at many points *en route*. But how we boo-ed as we passed the haunts of luxury and idleness in Piccadilly and Pall Mall!

Tall, white-whiskered old majors would examine us superciliously through monocle or pince-nez, and to our secret discomfiture would seem entirely unmoved by the jeers and laughter of the passing proletariat. On that one day of the year at least, hardly a demonstrator but believed in his very bones that the day of reckoning was at hand and that soon the gutters would run with the blood of the oppressors. The caperings of a restive police horse, or the sour look of an inspector would be enough to arouse passions to fever heat. But little ever happened to spoil the show.

In Hyde Park itself the great ones made their speeches throughout the afternoon, we youngsters experiencing severe emotional stress as father's crowd waxed or waned, affected sometimes by the attractions of louder or better speakers, or by little self-contained debates within the crowd itself,—perhaps

even by a dog-fight. As the day wore on feeling died down, the demonstrators got hungry or even thirsty, and gradually realised that sooner or later a start must be made for home. Then it was that excitement arose.

There were always a few ardent ones who felt that something tangible ought to be done and for their pains they usually found their way to the police station and remained there for the night. I remember Ted —, a brewer's drayman from West Ham, running like a hare across the Park pursued by half a dozen policemen. I never knew what the row was about. He was one of the heroes of our young days by reason of his prowess as a street corner orator. He was a witty speaker with many stories and anecdotes, and a big store of irony and satire.

He had a brilliant daughter who could play the piano really well. He used to say that their front-room was so small that when she wanted to play the piano she had to sit in the passage and play it through the door. No doubt a colourable imitation of Jack Jones' story that when he wanted to get into his trousers he had to open the window. He would compare his daughter's opportunities and attainments with those of Queen Victoria: "Look at 'er," he would say, "she 'as thirty pianos in 'er 'ouse and can't play a bleeding mouth organ."

He came to Bow very often to speak at street-corner meetings, but we never felt quite happy until the meetings were over and the audiences safely

home. He had a way with him. He would step down from the platform into the crowd and tackle interrupters with his fists. After a free fight in the crowd he would remount the platform and, glowering at his crowd, would ask, "Would anyone else like to ask a question?"



## XII

### MUSIC—AND MUSIC

FATHER believes in music. I can think of no other way of putting it. And he is "fond of music". I don't mean that he understands Bach or that he would consider the music of Stravinsky or Debussy as anything more than an unpleasant noise or even a "blooming row". He thinks music good when it sounds good and bad when it doesn't. He might sit through a Beethoven Symphony to please a friend but he would take a good deal of the music on trust. Wagner's operas would send him to sleep, though he would be intrigued and pleased by Sir Henry Wood and his promenade concert orchestra performing the Bridal Chorus and Wedding March from *Lohengrin*.

He would like that sort of music because it would sound like a bridal chorus and wedding march. It would make him feel happy. For the same sort of reason he would be impressed by Chopin's Funeral March; he would not fail to catch the meaning of those solemn opening chords; nor would the thrilling beauty of the later passages escape him.

But the music he likes and believes in is the music the masses enjoy. He likes comic songs, sentimental songs, love songs, socialist songs, and hymns out

of the "Ancient and Modern" hymn book. He likes a good marching song and a good march. He looks upon music as an ally because a poor meeting with bad speakers can be converted into a good meeting by music—indifferent or good. He knows that people in the mass can sometimes be stirred more profoundly by community singing (it was never called that in his day) than by rhetoric and eloquence. Both singing and oratory appeal to the emotions through the medium of sound, and depend largely for their full effect on the silencing of criticism.

Two extreme examples of his employment of noise and music may be given. The first, election days in Bow and Bromley. From early morning till late at night vans and lorries packed to suffocation with children of all ages will parade the Borough yelling popular songs till you would think they must burst, and always bringing in between each song that wretched doggerel:

Vote, Vote, Vote for Mister Lansbury  
Chuck old (what's his name) in the eye—eye,  
For Lansbury is the man and we'll have him if we can,  
And we won't vote for (what's his name) any more.

to the tune of "God save Ireland".

Towards the end of the day, vans and lorries are emptied and the children form into an enormous procession which winds its innocent way through every street in the constituency with, if possible, even louder singing and terrific cheering and booing.



THE MATCHBOX MAKER'S CHILD "TAKING HOME THE WORK"  
(Period 1912.)



SOME OF GEORGE LANSBURY'S YOUTHFUL SUPPORTERS  
(Period 1912.)

[Face page 100

Trams and buses, lorries and private cars are interrupted on their journeys and in spite of attempted protests, compelled to stop while the procession passes. Father always leads this procession in person, carrying a huge black cat, given him by the Women's Section of the local Labour Party as a mascot. He must be very superstitious, for I know he would never go through an election without taking the black cat with him.

The women of Bow are of the same mind and if ever he threw over the black cat I verily believe they would do the same by him.

Father believes in putting children into the political arena as soon as they are out of their cradles. He thinks what was good for us is good for them.

Looked at from a practical viewpoint, these children's lorry rides and processions are the most efficient method for arousing lazy voters and making them go to the poll. Door to door canvassing on polling day is unnecessary. The children talk of nothing but the election, flood the streets and even the houses with handbills, and the indifferent voter feels that he might as well be out and see the fun. Once get the voter away from the fireside and into the street, and the journey to the polling booth itself is as good as accomplished.

The other example was the occasion of one of the *Daily Herald* meetings in the Albert Hall. It was in 1917 and the Russian Revolution was an accomplished fact. The meeting was called by father and a few friends to welcome the revolution, send

fraternal greetings to the revolutionaries, and show the Government that at least some of the people of England would do their utmost to prevent allied intervention on behalf of the old régime in Russia.

At the time few in England knew what a Bolshevik or a Menshevik was, and the soviet system was hardly born. Russia was simply a country to the east of Germany peopled by ignorant moujiks who provided the Cossacks to fight the Germans. A comfortable notion indeed. But the revolution meant the end of the Tsarist régime. The war, for Russia, was at an end. A country, almost a continent, was experiencing the birth-pangs of a new economic and political system. I will quote father's own words on the meeting:<sup>1</sup>

This meeting, quite unique in the annals of public meetings in London or England, was one of the biggest and most enthusiastic ever held. It seemed as if all the long pent-up feelings of horror and shame of war and intense longing for peace were at last let loose. When the organ pealed out the "Internationale" the audience rose up and sang as at a revival meeting. When Madame Clara Butt sang the verses of "God the All Terrible" Atheists, and Christians, Deists and Jews, Moslems, and Hindus, all joined in the prayer, "Give to us peace in our time, O Lord." The verse ,

God the all pitiful  
Is it not crying  
Blood of thy people  
Like water outpoured.

<sup>1</sup> *My Life*, by George Lansbury (Constable).

brought tears coursing down the cheeks of strong men and full-hearted, brave women.

Clara Butt sang like one inspired, and inspired she must have been by such instant, terrific, and fierce response in ten thousand people. Different indeed from the response, enthusiastic enough maybe but of a different kind—more conventional, more correct, and more expected—of the many tens of thousands to whom she had sung in every part of the world.

It may be difficult to-day, even for socialists, to catch the spirit of that meeting. Some may be too young to remember, others so old as to have forgotten, the persecution of socialists, communists and even simple co-operators under the Tsarist régime. Their sympathies may be for exiled grand dukes, real and imaginary, and for those unfortunates who are no longer able to play their parts in the intrigues, corruptions, and bestialities of the pre-war Russian Court. At the Albert Hall meeting, as father writes:

We remembered with reverence and gratitude the long long roll of our martyred dead who, through the ages, wrought great things for us; and remembered specially the uncounted immortal hosts whose bones lie bleaching under the turf, or even yet along the roads that lead from Moscow to the mines of Siberia.

Father not only believes in music at meetings, he believes in it in the home too. In his early

married days jazz, crooning, and rag-time melodies were unknown. Even the ear-splitting marches of Sousa had not yet assailed the world. Wireless was a pretty notion of scientists, for wires themselves were only in their infancy; the gramophone had not supplanted the phonograph, with its hoarse and waxy cyclindrical records of unspeakable performances on zylophone, concertina, etc. The phonograph itself was a crude and clumsy affair, serving only to amuse the well-to-do. But if America had not yet lifted up "His Master's Voice", or the B.B.C. received its licence to invite itself into our kitchens and parlours, every family had its own kind of musical entertainment.

In our home, when we made whoopee, we made it around the "American Organ". I do not know whether this old instrument actually originated in America as its name implies; but I do know that it had been to Australia, and in the backwoods had served its turn at impromptu prayer meetings or Sunday evening sing-songs. Mother loved it and in spite of her early married life of hard physical work spent all her leisure playing it.

If, on one of those rare evenings in the 'nineties when father was "at home", you had been passing along St. Stephen's Road, Bow, you might have observed a window with the "venetian" blind let down, streaming with condensed human breath, open just a little at the top to let out volumes of spent air and gas fumes.

Outside you might have seen a gathering of small

boys and girls, the postman perhaps pausing a moment on his round, and a bent old woman with a jug under her apron going for the supper beer to the pub. over the way, or returning with it; and the policeman, perhaps, a few yards away, appearing not to notice anything unusual. From within a loud, deep, and resonant baritone voice, a little uncertain as to pitch, would be filling the evening air, accompanied by the peculiar strains of the American organ. It would be George Lansbury, that desperate, dyed-in-the-wool red revolutionary, free for an hour or two from the labour of making socialists and spending the ratepayers' money, entertaining his family and perhaps a friend or two with song.

For the time being, politics and affairs would be forgotten and we would "let the sound of music creep in our ears". His favourite song was "Queen of the Earth". Let the reader not trouble about the exact words of this extraordinary ballad. It proceeded through recitative-like verse toward loud and triumphant chorus and would have been even more popular could it have been accompanied by the coloured lights and electric organ of the up-to-date cinema. It was indeed popular, and it was about love. But there was no crooning. It was not to be classed with modern "blues". It had a deep and serious meaning, and expounded the desirability of true and constant love.

It was the favourite with the cornet-player sitting on the extreme edge of the front seat of the four-in-



hand brake, as it made its Sunday morning trip to Epping Forest with a group of workmen. It suited the desultory gait of the horses and the rhythmic swaying of the passengers; the words satisfied the serene mood of the men, who had left their women behind cooking the Sunday joint and chartered the brake to make the three-mile journey that was necessary in order to qualify as a "bona-fide traveller" for a few pints of beer. To-day if you want to drink at certain hours you must eat sandwiches, or at least pay for them. In those days you had to travel three miles.

Father's indoor audience consisted of his children, five or six at a time, enraptured by the words, the music, the singer and the organ. Mother was of course the accompanist, and very proud she was too. Vigorous applause would greet the singer as he crashed out the last words, "As queen of the earth she reigneth alone"—and an instant demand sent up for an encore. Then indeed if we had tears would we prepare to shed them.

For the encore was a completely devastating song about a bugler who, though wounded, stuck to his post (to be faithful to the author of the song, "raised himself in the bloodstained snow, one loud long blast on his bugle to blow") the idea being to warn his comrades of the enemy's approach.

Father was always moved just as much as his listeners, and would find it more than ever difficult to find the note with that exactitude which young children and great critics desire. We all used to

love "The Bugler" because it led us on by gentle stages through tragedy, heroism and self-sacrifice to the quiet serenity of a lovely death, ending with the lines,

There in the snow, lieth he low,  
Gallant old bugler, shot by the foe.

Even in the eighteen-nineties we were pacifists, and glad that the song was about a bugler and not a real soldier; but we didn't quite like him being an *old* bugler. We thought all buglers were bugler-boys, as all drummers were drummer-boys.

At one time father's repertory was quite extensive, including "Love's old sweet song", "The Cabin with the roses at the Door", "The Powder Monkey", "Down the Vale", "Admiral Blake", enlivened by a few contemporary comics such as "Our Tyke" "The Golden Dustman" and a score of similar songs. As the years rolled on these performances became less frequent, partly because father was less frequently available and partly because his voice began to deteriorate from the effects of continual outdoor speaking. And of course we were all getting more sophisticated, if not fastidious, as he got nearer sixty than forty.

It is easy to fall into the error of assuming modern means of employing leisure to be vastly superior to those of earlier days. But giving all due credit to the gramophone, the wireless set, the cinema and other time-users for whatever they do for us,

let us remember that they have destroyed in thousands of children all idea of taking a hand personally in the social duty of entertaining. They have only to stay at home and listen, or go to the pictures and both see and listen. Soon, no doubt, with the coming of television they will be able to stay at home and do both.

When father was a boy there were always two or three singers of a sort in every family, and those who were not singers or players of the piano or fiddle, were grateful to listen to those who were. He was one of the people. Distinct, perhaps, from the ordinary working-man-in-the-street by reason of his public work and his serious and even religious outlook, he yet found his domestic happiness in the same surroundings and by the same means as nine out of ten other men of his time. Neurotics were not so numerous in Dan Leno's day as they are in the days of Al Jolson and Rudy Vallee.

As a family we were musical. We all loved the family musical evenings, but positively there were no geniuses amongst us—not even potential ones. The elder girls played the piano, sang duets at school concerts, and often co-starred with father at home. Among the smaller fry, I think I shone weakly as a violinist; my elder brother gained more kudos because of his aptitude with a very flashy German mouth-organ.

Father encouraged us all impartially. I can remember one occasion, however, when his attitude was quite the reverse of encouraging. My sister

and I were practising a rather difficult piece in one corner of the "front room" while he waged wordy warfare with a comrade in another. He enquired testily whether we couldn't play it quietly, or at least make it sound, "you know, Edgar old boy, a bit more like music—you know, the sort you hear at concerts". We were serious and sought refuge in tears, but for once even this failed to move him, though it brought mother on the scene in a rage. I can still hear him expostulating with her: "Well, Bessie, darling, it really *is* a dreadful noise". At last, after forty years I am on father's side.

There are some things, however, for which I shall never forgive him. Whether he thought our music, bad as it was, good enough for the poor, (unlike him this, I'm afraid), or whether he hoped that the people, expecting to hear a pair of prodigies would roll up in thousands and become ensnared in a socialist meeting, or whether in his care-free way he just thought music was music and nice to have at a public meeting, I do not know. What I do know, however, is that a day came when he gave it out to the world that two of his children would perform at one of the meetings of the Social Democratic Federation and fill in the half hour between "doors open" and the arrival of the speaker. I was to perform on the fiddle and my sister was to play the piano.

These were the days of horse buses and trams and punctuality at meetings an ideal only. When father

introduced us you might have thought of Napoleon's words—that every infantryman carried in his knapsack a field-marshal's baton. However, we certainly did entertain that meeting and were the star turn, though not in the way we had intended. We began shakily, I with a tremulous bowing hand, my sister Bessie rather uncertainly at the piano. The audience, called to the meeting to hear one or two of the lordly ones like Harry Quelch and Belfort Bax, went on with their conversation, moving noisily about the hall, spitting and smoking, and laughing and joking as is the way with audiences at public indoor meetings when anything is going on other than the speeches, and sometimes even then.

We struggled on, glad to think that they could hardly hear us, let alone notice our many mistakes, our flats and our sharps, until that nerve-shattering moment when one of us forgot the preliminary arrangement about repeating or not repeating a certain passage. First we tried nudging one another, then whispered denunciations, and finally loud recriminations. We were ten and fourteen years of age and as I have said took matters seriously. The conversation, the laughing, and the wandering about stopped. Complete silence ensued save only for our heated altercation. We felt the sudden silence and were flabbergasted. Then someone shouted that we should "start all over again". Another, wiser, advised turning over the page and going straight on; one earnest, excited and stuttering comrade whispered loudly in

our ears that if we would only go on nobody would know what had happened.

Through it all we could hear, and almost feel, father himself roaring with laughter and calling upon the crowd to witness this apt example of the co-operative spirit in practice. Luckily the speaker arrived in good time to deliver his address, or I verily believe the audience might have taken sides and settled the rights and wrongs of the matter in a free fight.

A similar affray took place a year or two later. About a dozen members of the Party had formed a band. As socialists they were zealous, enthusiastic, and hard working; by trade they were boot-repairers, cigar-makers, tailors and the like; as musicians they were unmentionable. After all, you can't turn a good comrade out of the band just because he can't play. I know this now because I was one of them, and went on playing the fiddle assiduously until twenty-five years ago or thereabouts; and just about then was taken to a concert and heard some nonentity play Raff's Cavatina and a Chopin Nocturne, after which I put away my poor little pieces of wood and catgut for a well-earned rest.

To return to the band. The object of its formation was unobjectionable; it was to raise funds for the party and save money by performing at soirees, socials, public meetings, etc., free of charge. On the night in question, there was luckily no dis-union in the band. The trouble arose between those who wanted to hold the meeting and those who wanted

the meeting to hear the band play (that is to say, the band itself). The speaker was very late, and having played it once we had been asked to repeat a curious piece called "The Caliph of Baghdad" to fill in the time. It was our favourite, and once we got our teeth into it time, space, and surroundings ceased to exist. We had, in fact, got our teeth into it and could see and take in nothing but crotchets and quavers, when a rival noise invaded the room. The speaker with entourage had arrived.

In ordinary circumstances his arrival would have caused instant, universal, and thankful applause, not to say relief. We in the band recked nothing of this; we were wrestling strenuously with the obstinate Caliph for the second time, correcting our earlier errors, and getting him down at last. The Chairman (Edgar E. Metivier—later a Guardian of the Poor at Hornsey whither he fled after this event) shouted loudly to the band to desist. We did not hear—more, we refused to hear.

Others joined the chairman, begging us to realize that the affair was really a meeting, not a concert, and that like good socialists we ought not to waste the precious minutes now that the lordly one had arrived. But we fiddled away with might and main. We were deaf, but only to their entreaties.

At last the chairman resorted to force, slammed the keyboard cover on the hands of the player, while others forcibly restrained the fiddlers. Thus only was the band silenced. Peace was restored for the

speaker but only after loud and slowly diminishing argument. On these occasions it must have been difficult for the speaker to put over the socialist message of brotherhood and of peace. I know father didn't try, he just roared with laughter.



## XIII

### AMUSING THE POOR

MANY years later really brilliant artists used to make their appearance at our East End meetings. Some of them might have been paid by wealthy supporters of the Movement but many would come because father persuaded them. Perhaps they were curious to know how the unlettered masses would receive their performances. Most of them were soon enlightened.

Whatever may be the case to-day, when jazz, blues, light opera, and the classics jostle one another over the wireless at lunch-time, tea-time, and supper-time, in pre-wireless days the people preferred their own kind of music and their own kind of dancing.

The artist who brought the house down every Sunday evening at the Bow Baths meetings was a "Club-turn"—a tall, lean youth, endowed with hands like bunches of bananas and a voice like a foghorn. His repertory included such popular songs of the times as "Playthings", "Who were you with last night" (frequently sung with pointed allusion to married men whose wives had been imprisoned for crimes of violence connected with the suffrage campaign), "Skylark" (a sentimental melody of

father-love, mother-love, and child-love), "It's only a beautiful picture in a beautiful gilded frame", "It's only a bird in a gilded cage," etc.

It was hard luck for a certain prima donna who followed him one evening. Her name was known throughout Europe and no one was more excited than she to know how the audience would respond to her singing. Unfortunately, her first piece was from "The Flying Dutchman" and not one in fifty understood a note. The general air of expectancy gave place to one of mystification followed by boredom and even resentment. Such music was past belief. The old ladies of Bow began to talk unconcernedly and soon the piece ended in a babble of conversation punctuated by shouts of "quiet please" from the harassed and uncomfortable stewards.

She was followed by a brilliant violinist whose fee (a very large one) had been paid by Joseph Fels, a great friend and loyal supporter of father's, a patron of those arts which he understood, and a fanatical believer in the taxation of land values. This performer met with a better fate. His amazing technique amused the audience immensely and during a specially brilliant and showy passage involving what looked like contortions and gymnastics on the part of the player, they giggled and shuffled, expressing aloud their admiration, intermittently clapping, keeping time with their feet and all but drowning the violin itself. But if you go to Bow and Bromley to-day and ask some of the older inhabitants which per-

formance they enjoyed most of all, I think the palm would be handed to a troupe of Morris Dancers who appeared one evening in Bow.

Old English country dances are all right in their way; on the village greens of Buckinghamshire they are, I believe, delightful, and no doubt the old English costumes and the old English people fit in perfectly with that environment. In the Bow Baths Hall, however, it was a different matter. The saucy antics of the buxom and bare-legged ladies invited and received loud and ribald remarks from the brightest of the Bow-belles. They could not connect the performances on the platform with the freedom, the happiness and the beauty of the village green in summer time in the days when England was "Merrie". They only saw what was before their eyes and it made them laugh.

You could always be sure that the people of Bow would extract the last ounce of entertainment out of the performers. True, they might see farce in tragedy, and tears might flow in rivers at the merest sentimental rubbish, but they "knew what they liked", and that's all that mattered to them. In spite of the B.B.C. and the gramophone, they are the same to-day.

## XIV

### IN THE FOLD

IF father were asked to say what was the happiest period of his adult life, he might find the answer difficult. I can look at the question objectively and find no difficulty in answering it. His happiest days were those which followed his return to the fold of the Church after an absence of about ten years or so. I do not know whether it is good to belong to the Church of England or any other Church. But I would not question any man's right to find happiness in the study of its doctrine or the attempted practice of its precepts. There is no doubt whatever that father found help, comfort and guidance from regular attendance at Bow Church. For a few years he went twice on Sundays, and took the Sacrament at least once a month.

It was a curiously quiet period for him. Politics took the form of a controversy between Free Trade and Protection, as the country drifted in a leisurely manner towards the tremendous upheaval of 1906, when Arthur James Balfour and his Tory government were overthrown and replaced by Asquith and Lloyd George at the head of a Liberal Government with a record majority. Father seemed less

concerned about national affairs, and even local affairs took up less time than formerly. He saw much more of mother and the rest of us.

He was still a guardian and a councillor; he remained a candidate for Parliament. He was, in fact, defeated in a three-cornered fight in Bow and Bromley in 1906. My impression is that at this period he devoted more time to living instead of occupying himself almost exclusively with the lives of others and with the means of life in general. His regular attendance at Church and interest in the doings of the Parish filled some of his socialist friends with disgust. They had the common but erroneous notion that even real christians were more concerned with the next world than with this. They believed with Lenin that religion was the opium of the people. If George Lansbury were a real Socialist, they argued, he would not waste precious time on it.

Every Sunday afternoon, father conducted the bible class and many a time have I heard him answering with sincerity and the wisdom of experience the sceptical questionings of the young, primed to the muzzle with the atheistic teachings of Robert Blatchford. To-day Blatchford is a Spiritualist, but twenty-five years ago he was applauded and denounced because of his two books, *God and my Neighbour* and *Not Guilty*, both of them clever if elementary works based on the "deterministic" theories of Haeckel and others. These books were all the rage amongst thoughtful youngsters of those

days, with their superficially unanswerable arguments on the subject of free will, and their devastating criticism of orthodox christianity and the tribal God of the Old Testament. The day of the scientific apologist for religion had not yet dawned.

Every Sunday afternoon, father sat amongst his boys and youths, quite in the style of Rabbi ben Karshook.

Quoth a young Sadducee;  
"Reader of many rolls,  
Is it so certain we  
Have, as they tell us, souls?"  
"Son, there is no reply!"  
The rabbi bit his beard:  
"Certain, a soul have I—  
*We* may have none," he sneered.

We children were all amazed at the turn of events, though most of us followed father into the Church. My own first attendance (in his company) filled me with astonishment. For the previous ten years my Sunday afternoons had been spent at the local Ethical Sunday School where attempts were made by the disciples of Stanton Coil to imbue us with an ethical code compiled from the Koran, the Bible, the writings of the great Victorians, and the sacred books of the Chinese.

I could hardly believe my ears when I heard the rector intoning the litany, and the people chanting the responses. To me it was like a performance. It was like talking out loud to oneself in a bus or in the street; and as for kneeling

and addressing God aloud, it seemed completely hypocritical.

These feelings lasted only for a few weeks. Father was my hero in all things and if he could actually kneel and pray and accept not only the teachings of Christ but the doctrines of the Church, lock, stock and barrel, why couldn't I? With his example before me I tried hard to understand and to pray. I do not know whether I succeeded or not; but within a year I was confirmed.

Father interested himself in the affairs of the Church of England Men's Society and helped to form a branch of the Church Socialist League in Bow. He addressed meetings of the Temperance Organizations, yet stood up boldly for the Rector when bitterly attacked for not signing the pledge.

I walked with him the mile or so to Church on Sundays; he hummed or softly sang hymns the whole way, in a state of happy oblivion. Not always though. Sometimes we would discuss the many thorns and stumbling blocks in the path of the believer. To me they were very real.

I loved being in harmony with him, but was worried by the scoffing and jeering of my materialistic and free-thinking friends, and by an underlying scepticism which remains with me to this day with compound interest. He would give the right answers to my questions (always naïf enough to be difficult) with kindness and wisdom, and certainly more convincingly than anyone else could have done; but I was too young to realize that truth is not necessarily

simple and easy. I was one of those for whom a sign of some sort should have been vouchsafed. I wanted to see mountains moved.

I have said that father was happy. In the Church he found a sure refuge from the turmoil, the argument and the hubbub not only of politics but of the ordinary affairs of life and work. He re-discovered St. Francis of Assisi (his defection from Christianity had lasted about ten years) and conceived a longing to go to Italy—to walk the paths and enter the places made holy by the feet and the presence of the Saint. He could not go, and may never go, yet when time is no more and the wicked and the good cease from troubling, his spirit may walk the Umbrian plains in company with one who stood by him in darkest life as guide and friend—who raised him up when the buffets of a material world had bruised him and laid him low.

He not only attended the church services; he took part in debates organised by the curates, attended the church socials and took an active part in national and local lay conferences. He was always an honoured speaker at the Church Congress until 1922, when an attempt was made to prevent him speaking because of his support of the Russian revolution. I do not think he would attend now, even if he were asked.

He supported the Church Football Club enthusiastically, and travelled on Saturdays to such outlandish places as Hackney Marshes (they *were* marshes then) or Wanstead Flats to support the



team. We were a poor lot of players, but father's stentorian voice on the touch-line many a time urged us to victory in the teeth of defeat.

In those few really happy years his Sunday evenings were spent at home. For many years he would devote one, two, or even three hours on Sunday evenings singing hymns and "sacred songs", sometimes in company with one or two of the girls, perhaps with one or other more or less self-conscious boy, but always accompanied on the organ by mother. Their favourites were taken not only from the Church Hymnal but also from the Ethical Hymn Book. Often this would take place after Church, or after a public meeting. They were both sublimely happy and would choose songs and hymns of hope and gladness. I can recall the shame we elder children experienced as, one by one, with the passing of the years we dropped out of these Sunday evening gatherings. We all had a complex about it. No doubt we were right to drop out, but we felt bad about it. The long warm summer evenings called us out; and so did our friends who were not impressed by hymns.

In the end, only the two of them were left. But they went on with their singing, wistfully perhaps, father's voice still strong and virile but less sure, and poor mother's legs growing more and more weary with pumping the bellows of the organ. That instrument was a comfort to mother, but I would class it with mangles, hearthstone, and brickdust for making life harder than it need be, and causing varicose veins, strained hearts, and the like.

## XV

### RUNNING A BUSINESS

FATHER had great personal cares and anxieties; apart from public affairs, he never found the practical work of earning a living congenial or easy. He was too tender to make a good "business man". He had become a partner in the veneer cutting business in which he formerly worked as a labourer, and was esteemed and respected (even loved) by most of the firm's customers, especially the impecunious Jews lately arrived from Poland and Russia, who found him specially easy to get on with—he trusted them all. Among these rather nice and human characters, many now rich and prosperous, his name is still one to conjure with and his earlier deeds matters to recall and marvel at.

His actual control of the veneer cutting establishment was notable by reason of the variety of characters who found a refuge there from the storms and stresses of the outside world. The curate recommended a pimply-faced, anæmic-looking youth; a fellow guardian urged the claims of a consumptive old fellow with only a few months to live; or a corner-boy would beg for a chance to start a life of honest toil—all would be taken on whatever their qualifications

for the actual work. Obviously father could never have become a millionaire, and it was only the urgent necessities of a large and clamorous family that prevented his throwing up all attempts to run a business.

However, he kept at it long enough to see all his children on their feet, either married or working, and off his hands, but with no financial security beyond their capacity to work. He always told us that his aim so far as we were concerned was to keep us and educate us until we were strong enough to work for ourselves. If I can do as much for my children I shall be satisfied though I fear they may not be.

Father spared the rod, but this is not what spoiled the children. For there was always mother. He could quieten the most turbulent squabbles, driving mutiny underground with looks and words; but in his absence mother found words and looks of no avail. She was stern, but just, and in order to keep the house clean and tidy and to settle our many disputations had frequent recourse to bodily chastisement. We didn't believe in this sort of thing and resented the indignity and pain bitterly. I am glad I can say she never punished us in cold blood but only when driven crazy by our uncouth manners and thoughtless ways. I have never struck my own children and never will unless they drive me to it. I don't believe in "meting out" punishment in cold blood. Parents cannot be judicial.

Father's efforts to keep peace and order in the



FATHER AMONGST HIS WORKMEN, ABOUT 1905

family usually amounted to a threat to "jolly well knock your two heads together". Once he took off a slipper in what mother used to call one of his "towering rages", intending to administer a real leathering; but the sight of the slipper caused so complete a débâcle that his rage quickly subsided and the slipper was replaced. Another of his metaphor-like threats, was to put a flea in the ear of an offender, but we always detected the weakness of this threat and were unmoved.

Mother was the labour master in our house; she divided the work amongst us and saw that it was properly done. She heard all our quarrels and administered justice, whether as arbitrator, judge or dictator. If there was any knocking of heads together, she had to do it. At one time there were seven of us all of school age and father being the humanitarian (apart from being out at work most of the time) mother's part was clear. Often we had to be whacked to prevent us whacking each other.

## XVI

### EARLY RECOLLECTIONS AGAIN

My own earliest recollection of father is connected with a Christmas morning of long ago. I was three and he was therefore thirty-one, already with five children to his credit. The "Father Christmas" legend was strong in our house and none of the children were supposed to wake until well into Christmas morning. But long before daylight excitement had wakened me up, and out from the bedclothes came a guilty hand and arm to see what Father Christmas had brought for me.

The first thrill was the feel of the stocking itself packed with things of various shapes and sizes. Even in the darkness the apple and orange were fairly obvious and a little disappointing.

The little hard objects of various shapes and sizes were mysterious at first but not for long. They were mere nuts and also disappointing. Then the plastic and messy sugared fig came under notice and lastly a real mystery protruding from the open end of the stocking. It was hard, bony, hairy and sinister. In the darkness I brought it close to my face for inspection, when suddenly something horrible snatched at my nose and then at my chin.

I dropped everything and set up a guilty howl which brought father rushing into the bedroom. A lighted candle soon cleared up the mystery for him, but not for me. The clutching hand was that of a kind of gollywog, not the modern floppy kind with no life, but a virile black-faced fellow, with straight black hair, blue coat and red trousers, and a pair of cymbals in his hands. When you squeezed his body he crashed the cymbals—and had clapped them on my nose in the dark.

Father had to sit on the edge of the bed (there were four of us in it—two girls and two boys ranging from three years to ten) and work the gollywog over and over again before my fears were set at rest. It was still horrible, even when he clapped the cymbals on his own nose.

Three or four years later he was still working in the timber yard. He was up before seven and my brother and I with him. It must have been winter all the time then, for the only picture I have is of dark mornings and father first lighting the oil lamp and then tackling the fire. Is there a more desolate sight than an empty grate on a cold and frosty morning? I mean the sort of open grate that used to be fitted in every tiny cottage, not the lordly “kitchen range” or “kitchener” with its intricate dampers and flues.

First the digging and scraping away of ash and cinder with hands and poker, and the sorting out of half-burned pieces of coal for the new fire. Then the careful building up, with old newspapers and

chopped-up sugar boxes bought from the tea-shop for a penny or two, and the addition of fresh coal or coke, very gingerly placed so as not to crowd the young flames unduly. Lucky were we if the chopping had been done over-night and the wood properly dried. Then the application of the match and the breathless moments of suspense as the curly wisp of smoke turned to a small blue flame, and the small blue flame into a yellow one, and then crack, crack, and crack again.

We were lucky, the fire was under way. In a moment the iron kettle was on the fire (gas still being a luxury for the well-to-do) and the Right Honourable George Lansbury could be heard out in the "wash-house" puffing and blowing and hissing between his teeth like an ostler as he performed his toilet with a bar of Sunlight soap over a pail of the coldest water in the world. There were no morning baths in those days, hot or cold; it was just a matter of stripping to the waist and bending over a pail.

But now the kettle is boiling and father makes the tea, while we boys take our turn with the pail and the soap, wiping ourselves with the same damp towel as father used. One of us takes a cup to mother (one of her few luxuries so far as I can remember) and then we get our share of the treat—a couple of sips from father's saucer, and a stand-up fight when he goes to his work as to who shall have the "grouts".

A simple story if you like, to be matched from thousands of humble homes of to-day and yesterday.



But washing over a pail of cold water in winter is not the hardship it may seem. Let the reader try it, not in the bathroom but outside the kitchen door. He will find it unrivalled for dispelling "those blues". Meantime the girls were making the beds, scouring the bedrooms, and minding the babies.

We were luckier than most families in the same station of life by reason of our grandfather being able to send us away to the country for a fortnight in the summer. We used to go to Wincanton, in Somersetshire, and father always went with us. The whole family of us, with luggage, prams, and the usual personal impedimenta, would drive up to Waterloo station on an open timber truck, father taking the reins. How proud he was of his driving! You would think he was Lord Rothschild driving his team of zebras to the office in St. Swithin's Lane.

Pride is not one of father's failings, and few can feel less personal satisfaction than he does over political or social achievement. But as a driver of horses he was unbearably conceited. Whatever old nag he drove, his talk and bearing were those of the driver of a thoroughbred. It was a sight to see him gather up the reins and crack the whip as we started on our summer holiday. For us the thrill was almost unbearable; we never knew for certain that one of us, perhaps more serious, one of the boxes, might not fall off with the first jerk of the horse on the traces. Father's exultation would last all the way to Waterloo Station. With us, however, the initial excitement would wear off

after ten minutes. Then would begin a scrambling and a bickering, half-subdued, between the elder ones for the seat on the driver's board, and sly digs and kicks among the rest of us for the superior seats amongst the luggage.

Once I remember howling very loudly indeed and father, preoccupied with what he regarded as a restive steed, just yelled over his shoulder: "For goodness' sake kick him somebody." I can imagine his chagrin had anybody carried out his behest. Nobody kicked, however, but his intervention brought peace to the family for at least a few minutes.

Despite the bustle and excitement at Waterloo station father never forgot the workers. On the platform he would take us along to the engine telling us all about the work of the driver and fireman, and trying to explain the mechanism of the engine. Even the guard received his share of attention. When the whistle sounded and the journey began he would start us all singing:

Three cheers for the engine-driver  
Three cheers for the engine-driver  
Three cheers for the engine-driver  
Early in the morning.

We understood this part of the song; the engine-driver was our hero and we sang with gusto to the tune of "What shall we do with a drunken sailor", but when it came to the chorus:

Put him in a tub and roll him over  
Put him in a tub and roll him over  
Put him in a tub and roll him over  
Early in the morning.

we couldn't understand it at all, and just put it down to the well-recognised soppieness of grown-ups. It was the sort of mystery that most parents specialize in. They make child life difficult, but afford some satisfaction to parents.

Another thing that made life just a tiny bit awkward for the elder children was the attitude of the other passengers. We noticed it but father didn't. They were bored, angry, amused or they affected indifference. Occasionally, but very rarely, we were warmed by the smile of one or two who seemed to understand and appreciate the spirit of the gathering.

But often there were sour looks and unsympathetic remarks that gave us nasty feelings inside. We were all over-inclined to self-consciousness. In these moods father was like a lump of radium, throwing off energy, vitality and enthusiasm in all directions. Gloom, despondency and sadness were kept at a distance.

His attitude towards engine-drivers, tram and bus-conductors, waiters, dustmen, policemen, postmen, and other workmen is always the same. He believes in their kind of work.

He is more conscious of their work than of the work of doctors, financiers, company directors, statesmen and others. These last are clever but they so often go wrong without detection. The doctor can

kill his patient, the financier wreck his clients, the company director bring his shareholders to ruin, the statesman plunge his country into war. But ordinary workers have good, solid, practical things to do, whether driving trams or delivering letters. Trams do their journeys, and letters are duly delivered.

During our holidays at Wincanton we sometimes hired a wagonette and horse from a local farmer and drove over to Stourton Tower. Both father and mother were good community singers and however bumpy the road and uncomfortable the seats of the wagonette, the time would pass pleasantly. When the road was steep, we would all get out and push behind, and this happened frequently, for there were no arterial roads, and the side roads were both narrow and steep.

Our holidays were often darkened by the shadow of controversy, father often becoming embroiled in political discussions with yokels, farmers, and even with the country gentry. Even the most intelligent of them could not understand the deep red socialism of the Social Democratic Federation; and as for the smaller fry, lean, cadaverous and hungry, they would generally side with the squire whose politics they understood, and to whom they looked for work.

## XVII

### THE CHILDREN AND MORE ABOUT MOTHER

FATHER was patient and long-suffering with us all, and gave us all the education we wanted, if not as much as we needed. Perhaps this is not quite true of the two eldest girls, both of whom started out to be teachers but gave it up, one to get married and the other to remain at home and help with the work. By the time my elder brother and I were due to leave our Board school, father was over forty. There was more money about (though still far from a fortune) and it was possible for us to go to a superior school where there were "forms" instead of "standards". But we were exceedingly unhappy without our old friends. Our discomfiture may have been increased because of the addition of Euclid, French, geometry, and trigonometry to the curriculum.

School games were not then organised as well as they are now. All games were played out of school hours and mostly in the streets, filthy and muddy as they sometimes were. I can understand father's keen interest to-day in the laying out of playing grounds, running tracks, recreation grounds and parks for children.

He is almost fanatical about it and gets things

done because he remembers his own children and their playmates—the girls playing “hop-scotch” or “marbles and gobs” on the muddy pavement, or skipping with old bits of rope tied together and stretched across the road; the boys at football or cricket, with lamp-post for wicket, or little ragged coats down in the road for goalposts, always on the lookout for the approach of the “copper” whose duty it was to prevent the streets being used as play-grounds.

The roads were always of macadam, puddly and muddy, or dusty and bumpy. The universal habit of “shaking the mats” against the wall of the house, helped to fill the streets with dirt. Horses and donkeys did the rest. To open the street door on a dry windy day meant filling the house with tiny bits of grit and filth; and playing in the streets resulted in the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth being filled similarly. There were more horses about in those days; the City of London Corporation used to employ hundreds of tiny boys to run around the streets with “dustpans and brushes” to gather up the refuse; unofficially they were called “sparrow-starvers”. Most boys envied them their jobs, as they dodged under horses’ noses or between their legs.

We didn’t put up with our new school for long. At fifteen years of age my brother started work as office-boy with the Bechuanaland Exploration Company, and a little later I started in the same capacity with a firm called the Underfeed Stoker Company. My brother was affluent on 6s. a week, and I less affluent on 4s. a week. Mother primed us

with her own enthusiasm and optimism. Everybody had to start at the bottom, and after all, look at Abraham Lincoln and a host of others who had risen "from log cabin to White House". It was no use. After a few months my brother Bill had left his romantically named employers to seek real romance as an apprentice on a fourmaster called the *Titania*. Father and mother and two or three of the young ones made the arduous journey from Bow to the West India Docks at 5 o'clock in the morning to see his boat pass through the bridges. Actually, he went away as a midshipman (that's what we liked to call him) and returned three years later much happier and more experienced as an able-bodied seaman, an occupation which he kept up for several years.

His first trip lasted three years during which he

- (a) Ran away from the *Titania* because instead of being treated as a "midshipman" he had to do the work of a cabin-boy,
- (b) Spent a week hiding in the coal-bunkers of a Scandinavian boat in Freemantle (Australia) on which vessel he then signed on as an able-bodied seaman,
- (c) Got off at Cape Town and worked as a clerk on the Cape Government Railways, until the Salvation Army saved him; then
- (d) Took himself off as able-seaman once again bound for the Rio Grande, where he experienced many vicissitudes and gained much knowledge worth having,

- (e) Practically lived on salt pork, maggotty biscuits and the rum ration all the time.

One day we received a telegram to the effect that he was in Hull and taking the train to King's Cross arriving at 4 a.m. He made the journey in company with half a dozen rollicking sailor-boys. Mother, father and I went up from Bow in a "growler" to meet him. His gait was curious, let us say nautical. Mother said: "Willie, I do believe you've been drinking."

As for me, I spilt ink over the rich carpet in the Managing Director's room, took three hours to find my way from Walbrook to Laurence Pountney Hill (across Cannon Street) with an urgent letter, and enraged the directors by failing to understand their trumpetings on the telephone—an instrument which I find difficult to manage even now.

So I got the sack from my first job, and well I remember father's careful explanation to all and sundry that the firm needed someone much more experienced than I, and that within the limits of my experience (none) I had been a huge success. He convinced even me that this was so. Soon I began to feel quite the hero of the piece. Nevertheless, it was a devastating experience. I hated the idea of working in any other office, and begged father to let me work in the timber yard. He was nearly distracted. In the end I was sent back to school and later found a haven through the medium of an examination for Boy Copyists in the Civil



Service. We must all have given father a lot of worry. He did his best for us and gave us sound advice; and most of us ended up by doing just what we liked. He never tried to exercise compulsion upon any of us, or to persuade us to plan our lives according to his views.

It goes without saying that in politics and religion we were free always. He was no Barrett of Wimpole Street. He was only too glad when any of us showed signs of wanting to branch out. Anything was better than drifting aimlessly. But life was far too full for him to be able, even given the desire, to pester and worry us with his own notions as to how we should live our lives. Of course, he liked to think that we should all grow up into good Socialists, but if any one of us had taken an independent line and joined the Tories, he would have been quite content provided the renegade was a *good* Tory.

His own life as a social being was an open book for all to see. It was a life devoted almost entirely to serious thought and work; he had no time for lounging, loafing, philandering, or hobnobbing with those who had. After many years of trial, difficulty and real hardship, he and his Bessie loved one another as deeply as during the years of their courtship and early married life. Let it be conceded to the sceptic that there were often domestic arguments, quarrels and "scenes". Thank Goodness when one marries one does not forego the right to quarrel and forgive. They entertained the orthodox view that marriages are made in heaven and divorces in hell; that strong

drink was of the devil, and that religion (if not the Christian religion then some sort of religion) was good for everyone.

That we spent our lives in a "free house", so far as opinions and the conduct of life are concerned is borne out by the widely divergent lines along which we have travelled since we left the paternal roof.

We have a sister who we thought would bring credit to the family as a doctor. She was capable and even clever, but after passing the threshold of a career and being well on the way to a degree, she threw it all up, secured a job, and plunged into some local work in Bow and Bromley which involved pooling her very respectable salary with the wages and emoluments of workmen and working-girls and unemployed of both sexes.

She became a Communist, studied the Russian language, and became a translator in the Russian Embassy. She married a Russian (according to Russian law), and this proving unsatisfactory, married a second Russian. She is now living happily in Moscow with her baby, who speaks Russian only. She was always the favourite daughter, I suppose because she is the youngest. She visits England about once a year, but always hurries back to Moscow. She thinks we are all too soft over here. There are many things she dislikes in England and Russia, but on the whole she prefers a hard life under the despotism of Stalin to an easier life under the protection of Ramsay MacDonald.

Her husband, being a professor, is not one of the



FATHER, MOTHER (BOTH FRONT ROW) AND VIOLET (TOP RIGHT) IN RUSSIA, 1926

better-paid workers. He would be better off as a fitter's mate or labourer. In Moscow, Violet helps out the family income by working as an official translator. She writes home every month or so condemning us all for not being communists, and writes the most outrageous things about Labour politicians, abusing father for what she regards as his old-fashioned notion that capitalism may be displaced by socialism without bloodshed. Obviously she is not a pacifist, and believes that if necessary blood should be shed in order to bring about Socialism. She regards abhorrence of the shedding of human blood as a Lansbury weakness that ought to be eradicated. But she is still father's favourite daughter, and he accepts much of what she writes except about pacifism and bloodshed.

As for mother, in her last years she proved to be the one solid and unshakable rock in the whole family where Russia and the revolution were concerned. In her very young married days, before the growing family made it too difficult, she used to attend socialist and political meetings, and classes in economics. She was no speaker but what talent she had for music she put at the disposal of the movement. But in middle age the elder children took up the running and she was content to let them do the talking and arguing.

When the Pankhursts, with their tabulated statement of women's rights and grievances, came to Bow to open their national campaign for votes for women, they must have looked askance at our house-

hold and wondered what sort of a suffragist father was to have kept his wife "in subjection" by having such a large family; and what sort of a woman suffragist mother was to allow her husband to get away with all the glory. They never understood.

Mother believed ardently enough in votes for all women and all men, but with all her apparent simplicity, she maintained a mildly sceptical attitude towards some to those who had espoused the cause of votes for women. She wanted all women and all men to have the vote, whereas many of those who claimed to be feminists were limiting their demand to "votes for women on the same terms as they were or might be granted to men"—which in her view meant at that time "votes for all male householders and for such women as could become householders or property holders of some kind",—in other words "votes for women property-owners". In a way, she resented their coming into Bow and sidetracking the enthusiasm of the growing movement for Socialism into an agitation for "votes for women" which in her view was always a subsidiary issue. Nevertheless, when father burned his boats by resigning his seat in Parliament and contesting it again as an out and out woman's suffragist no one supported him more enthusiastically than mother.

If in her middle age she was inclined to leave politics to father and the children, her day was to come. In the last few years of her life, this quiet-spoken, gentle, retiring woman became the one

outstanding, unequivocating, uncompromising, enthusiastic champion of the Soviet régime in the family.

There are other supporters among us, but they would not be termed sound either by Moscow or the Communist Party. They have reservations, and sometimes they want to explain. They hanker after politics. They want communism according to English ideas and English culture. Not so mother. In her last years she was the complete internationalist. She had been to Russia and had read all about Russia, for and against. She knew what was wrong in Russia, and what was right. She knew what was right with England and what was wrong.

You couldn't put mother off her stride by stories of hunger in Russia to-day; she knew there had been starvation in Russia under the Czars; but there was starvation in England even under the Union Jack. There were bread queues in Moscow and dole queues in London. She had met many Russians and had found them all good to know.

Long before the Revolution, and long before the War, she had met Russian socialist refugees; they were good to know too, but they were hunted, haunted and harassed; and they told her stories of the shooting down by the hundred of unarmed men, women and children who had approached the Czar's palace to ask for bread. Mother was sound about Russia; she was over seventy and until her end lived for the day when changes as tremendous as those which have taken place in Russia would be brought about

in England. Meantime she used to knit little garments for Violet's baby in distant Moscow.

She was far and away more courageous politically than most men, and I think this may be true of most women who think about politics at all. Once the turn over to Socialism in her early married life had been made she maintained to the end her faith in the uncompromising Socialism of the old Social Democratic Federation as expounded by Hyndman, Quelch and the rest of her earlier teachers. But the tumult and noise of political strife, the boiling enthusiasm of public meetings, and even the reflected glory of great popularity and electoral victories often failed to penetrate to the heart of the house, to the scullery or the kitchen where a more practical though not less serious work than Socialist propaganda was going on.

She endured much at the hands of father's admirers. They thought her marvellous, and said so. She knew she was not marvellous, but did not trouble to disillusion them.

They congratulated her on his achievements which, they averred, would have been impossible but for her help, encouragement and inspiration. She was never a brilliant talker, and therefore took this also lying down. But sometimes in her later years she spoke a little wearily, if not bitterly, of the fate that had kept her and father so much apart.

I never heard her grumble that it threw so much work and responsibility on her hands, but that she felt keenly the separation from him is beyond

doubt. He never returned after more than a day's absence without bringing her flowers, not orchids or lilies, but a penny bunch of violets, a sprig of heather, or maybe some lilies of the valley or forget-me-nots. Precious indeed, but with all their fragrance incapable of sustaining through long days and longer nights one who needed the strong arms of the lover and protector.

He felt the separation, too, but life for him was brimming over with the excitement of action. While he held aloft the flaming torch, the passing of the months and the fading of the rose may have been unnoticed. For her, life seemed tinged with a sadness the effect of which none of us escaped. When she had an hour to spare she would turn to her organ and with a couple of the children would beguile the hours with songs, all of them sad, and some depressing beyond words. Nowadays we have our "blues" but the melancholy of the music is belied by the inconsequential words of the "crooner." Then, however, the music was sad, the words were sad. There was never any question of a *double entendre* in the words.

Picture, then, our tiny parlour somewhere about 1893, walls hung with yellowing photographs of grandfather and grandmother and father and mother, a pair of red plush pipe-racks over the mantelpiece, a "what-not" in one corner on which breakable ornaments might be stood for babies to knock off, scintillating lustres on each side of the fireplace, a glass case with unbelievable wax pears and grapes beneath, aspidistras



in the bay window, and huge magnificent family Bible on the little table in the very centre of the room—an important book containing, besides the scriptures illustrated by coloured pictures of great attraction, full particulars of every member of the family, with photograph complete. In this setting mother's own little concerts would take place. They were in a mood all her own. One of the favourites went something like this:

“I should like to die,” said Willie,  
“If my mother would die too,  
But she says she isn't ready  
For she's got some work to do”.

It will be agreed that there is no possibility of a *double entendre* here. It was just the contemporary idea of true filial love. The other verses were also lowering and morbid, but we loved them all, and I personally felt much aggrieved because my elder brother's name was Willie and the song seemed to me to reflect great but undeserved glory upon him. Another favourite song depicted the wanderings of an “Eric or little by little” sort of boy. I only remember the refrain which was,

“O where is my wandering boy to-night”,

sung to an air that would wring the withers of a rhinoceros.

If one of the family were out later than usual the song would seem to become even more pregnant with meaning, and it would not have surprised us had

a policeman knocked at the door to announce a tragedy. I think these songs could rightly have been classified as "blues" but the word wasn't coined. There were also such better known songs as "Jeanette and Jeaneau", "She is far from the Land", sundry versions of "Lord Rendle" and another specially pointed one "You'll never miss the water till the well runs dry"—this last a survival from Australian days, when wells did run dry and droughts caused widespread havoc among man and beast.

It was on one of these evenings that mother got the idea that we were musicians in the making. Instead of singing, we two boys stood solemnly one each side of the organ with our toy cricket bats for violins and plain sticks for bows miming the actions of the boys in the school band. My own emotions were so real that after a bar or two of the "wandering boy" I burst into tears and rushed out of the room where I remained for an hour crying my eyes out. I can still recall the enormous secret enjoyment which this breakdown gave me. It was one of the supreme luxuries of my life. But many weeks were to pass before I could hold out again through a full-length musical evening. Mother's fortitude was amazing. With eyes bright, and dark face flushed, her voice would reveal the vibrations of her very soul, as she extracted the last drop of emotion from words and music.

## XVIII

### LITTLE GEORGE'S BOAT

THE first great blow that came to mother was the death at the age of five of her first-born, "little George". She could never put him out of her mind for long. His toys were kept about the house long after his death—a witch-ball hanging from the ceiling, a model sailing ship preserved in a glass case. No doubt her mind dwelt on the loss of "little George" as she sang the most melancholy of her songs; and if this brought ease to her heart, who will blame her? If sadness lies heavily and secretly on the heart, far better let it come out into the open periodically and relieve the tension within.

The loss of little George's boat was a minor tragedy of later years. At the age of twelve we made bold to ask whether we might take this vessel from under its glass case and sail it on the lake in Victoria Park. We had seen model yachts of every rig on the lake, some racers and some the merest tramps; none of them looked like real sea-going vessels, however, and we nursed the illusion that if only we could persuade father and mother to agree we might take our model three-masted cargo-boat out and put everyone else to shame. It was impossible that any

other boat could look so trim or sail so fast. To our surprise, consent was given, not without a long lecture from father on the need for caution with so precious a thing, reinforced by some words, and many a tear, from mother.

Off we went then, hearts beating painfully, accompanied by half a dozen little ragamuffins who I fancy were more sceptical than we realized and they would own. Unlike us, they had not lived, as it were, under the shadow of little George's boat in its little glass case. Premonitions of disaster sent cold shivers through our bodies as we made our way to the lake. At length alternately aided and harassed by much friendly and some sarcastic advice, but decidedly unnerved by the casual demeanour of rival mariners, we placed our boat on the waters. At first nothing would make it head for the other side of the lake. Evidently, we thought, it was like a puppy and had to get accustomed to the water. But we were worried, and our followers began to talk mutinously.

Flinging discretion to the winds we gave the boat a great shove, and the voyage was begun. Alas, had we but heeded mother's pleading that we should sail it at the end of a string! It made its way to the middle of the lake without the aid of wind or sail, for the latter remained crinkled and creased to the end, with none of the bold "bellying to the wind" that we had promised ourselves. Once in the middle of the lake the momentum of our great push gave out and the vessel remained motionless while meaner craft passed swiftly on their way.

Our hearts went down to our boots. We waited patiently. Older people, seeing our distress and its reason, commiserated and advised. Some suggested throwing stones to agitate the water and thus bring the boat to realize that it was no longer under a glass case but in its native element. We rejected this plan as being too dangerous for the boat. At last the cynosure of model yachtsmen, an old sea-captain, came to us with advice. Sucking at his pipe meditatively he gave it as his opinion that we had sprung a leak and were shipping water. Ghastly thought!

It was but too true. She was down at the bows and had an obvious list to port. What waves, wind and water could never have accomplished had been brought about by years of idleness under the glass case. The timbers were dried up and cracks and leaks had developed unnoticed below the water line. So she sank, not grandly but gradually, hull, gunwale, poop, masts and flag. For that day, we kept our loss a secret from mother. We had a plan. It was winter, but next morning saw three eager forms making for the lake during the early hours given over to swimming. Three times we dived into those icy waters, and combed the muddy bottom with freezing fingers. All in vain. We decided that the boat was still sinking and might reach the bottom by the next morning.

We did not try again, however, but a year later the lake was drained and the bottom cleaned. We

turned up in full strength to claim possession of the wreck. There was abundance of roach, dace, perch, gudgeon, and even one or two enormous conger eels, but not a sign of little George's boat. So we abandoned all hope. Our genuine and obvious sorrow at losing it and the valiant efforts made to get it back must have touched mother's heart, for there were no scoldings—only an extra special softness in her reassuring voice.

## XIX

### A COMPARISON

ABOUT thirty-seven years ago, father walked into the bedroom occupied by my brother and me, woke us up with as little noise as possible, and told us to go to a certain little street about a quarter of a mile away, knock at a certain door, and ask for Mrs. Waterhouse. Mother was ill, we were told. We were quite young, but we knew vaguely what that meant. A baby was coming. We put on our clothes and went out into the dark streets, terrified by every shadow and every sound, expecting to be pounced upon from behind any minute. Eventually we found the old lady. She betrayed no great surprise, but quickly put on bonnet and cloak and accompanied us back home. She was a tiny, wizened old lady, very like a witch, with an outsize in reputations as a midwife.

She had officiated at the birth of every child in the family. When she appeared at the front door it was a case of "I came, I saw, I conquered". She did the cooking, made us all do our proper share of the work, scolded and smacked, and generally made herself disliked by us all. Incidentally she acted as nurse to mother and the newborn

child, and to a certain extent as foster-wife to father. Like a real mother she took a fancy to one or two of us and disliked intensely the rest of us—especially the girls. The first few days were always a novelty, but we were glad when she packed her box and departed.

Four years ago my twin boys were born. I wish I could think them more worthy brats than we were. They certainly ought to be. Long before they were due to arrive doctors consulted one another as to whether there were two of them or only one. The probable date of birth agitated them quite a lot and the whole affair assumed the importance of a major operation. Their mother went into a nursing-home, where two doctors and a special nurse in addition to the ordinary nursing staff of the place took the matter in hand.

In the little old house nobody seemed to worry and everything went on normally except for the change from mother to foster-mother—and except for mother herself who was doubtless only too well aware what was happening. Not one of us ever lost a day at school, or went to bed earlier or later, or worried in the slightest about the birth of a brother or sister. But when mother had twins there certainly was a little lifting of eyebrows amongst us, though the rest of the routine was the same. Nevertheless every new baby was welcomed by us all, especially by father, who spent hours nursing and coddling them, and trying to get the reputation of being the only one for whom they would stop crying. Like



most fathers he did his share of "walking the floor" at night with troublesome babies.

Father keeps in closer touch with all his children than most parents would do. No matter how busy he may be he spends a few minutes every morning ringing up one or two or all of them. He is keenly interested in their affairs whether great or small, and prouder of their minor achievements than of his own part in the affairs of the world. When they get into difficulties he will move heaven and earth to get them out. When they quarrel he helps them to patch it up. If their babies are ill, he shows himself a very medical encyclopædia. He knows what will give babies indigestion, and will tell you exactly what to give them for stomach-ache. When major troubles arise he is equally solicitous and helpful.

I have caused one or two commotions in my own life but cannot recall one word of blame or criticism from father, though many a word of advice and help. A public man is always liable to be "shot at" because of the doings of his children; and one hears and reads a lot about the responsibility of bearing an honoured name and of fathers who live under the threat of discredit which their children may bring upon them. Father never thought he was good enough to blame anybody, least of all his sons and daughters, because of their personal affairs: his own anxieties financial, domestic and political have filled him with wisdom and understanding.

He is one of the humblest men on earth. I think all great men are humble, whether they are clever

or not. Cleverness may be a hindrance to the great as it is a hindrance to the good.

One day in 1923 Moyna MacGill and I made up our minds to get married. There were many difficulties to overcome, involving the dissolution of a former marriage and my own appearance in public in a surprisingly unexpected, not to say unconventional rôle.

In Poplar I was prominent in public work, a borough councillor and a guardian of the poor. I was a candidate for Parliament, and those who thought about me at all expected me to make politics, or shall I say Socialism, my main work in life. I myself expected as much, and so did father. But something had happened within me that put all impersonal things in the background, and a good many personal things too. I told father what Moyna and I intended doing, and, unworthy as I was, expected him to "come the heavy father".

I was wrong. He was moved deeply, I could see, but not for the reasons I had imagined. He knew I had been very unhappy since the death of my first wife and was deeply concerned that I should find peace and happiness again. His only words were to the effect that nobody, least of all he, could advise us as to our proper course, but that he hoped we would both be happy—as happy as he and Bessie were. He said this with some diffidence, knowing well that for him and Bessie the active pursuit of happiness was over, whereas for us and others of our kind and age the chase was

still on with all its complications, difficulties and disappointments. Perhaps he was also feeling in the depths of his heart of gold that we had still to learn the lesson that the happiness which lasts a lifetime must be cemented with sacrifice and love not between two people only, but for one's fellow-creatures.

Someone told him that Moyna and I were meeting in Albemarle Street one morning to go away together, and to our great surprise (shall I say dismay?) we found him there at nine o'clock in the morning, not in the capacity of outraged parent to forbid the banns, but just to wish us godspeed. He kissed us both and we drove off in a car, leaving him on the kerb. At that moment we felt as though we had killed something inside him, but later knew we had done him an injustice.

A few years afterwards I found myself in hot water once again, this time because of the failure of a business for which I was responsible. Naturally, there was a good deal of publicity which must have been specially distasteful for father although he had nothing whatever to do with the business or the crash. He did his best to help us, but without money of his own was powerless. He said wryly that we ought to have chosen a father who made money for his children instead of one who went about looking after other people's affairs, and neglecting his children! (Exactly like him! there never was a better father). On Christmas Eve he wrote to us:

MY DEAR EDGAR AND MOYNA,

We both send our best love and good wishes to you all. This has been a hard, difficult, trying year for us all, but especially for you two. May the New Year be kinder and brighter. It is good to know you are both strong in love, faith and hope. These three always bring us mortals through. I am always too self-conscious to shout this aloud as I should do, but the longer I live and the more difficult and troublesome life in a material sense seems to become, I find myself resting solid and serene on the thought: to have loved well is to have lived well. I know you are striving to do this and therefore never feel afraid or down-cast about you whatever comes. So from Mother and me lots and lots of love and all good wishes for Christmas, New Year, and all the days to be.

Always,

DAD.

Earlier in the year he had written to my wife:

MY DEAR MOYNA,

I know you don't want a letter from us, but I feel I must send this line to say Cheero. The newspapers if they say anything later on will only be a nine days' wonder and you will not worry too much.<sup>1</sup> All it means is the boys must start again and work a bit harder. Life is rather a mystery, so much good and so much evil. We have all had some good, in fact a lot; just now it seems our turn for a double dose of the other.

But we both think of you and . . . and wish we could have taken it all on ourselves instead of the bother coming to you.

Lots and lots of love from us both,

G.L. AND MOTHER.

<sup>1</sup> Moyna was acting in "Interference" at St. James's Theatre, and, characteristically, father was worrying about her feelings, not his own.

The words "and Mother" had been added by mother herself. She always associated herself with his letters to us, sometimes signing them herself.

In July he wrote again to me:

House of Commons,

MY DEAR EDGAR,

Have been thinking lots about you; the only thing that distresses me is I can't help except to send you love and good thoughts.

I am quite happy about your future and . . . and am certain you will both come through. I don't care a rap what the press or anyone will say. All that has passed completely.

Don't hesitate to consult me if you wish. You *don't* worry me because I am convinced good must come out of all our troubles and tribulations.

Lots and lots of love to Moyna and yourself and the babies,

DAD.

The reader will note that whenever he mentions himself it is to take blame for not being able to help us, or to ridicule the notion that adverse publicity about our affairs could possibly hurt him. On both these matters he was I think wrong. Yet the truth is that he was not able to help us (there was really no reason why he should) because he himself was and always will be without money except that which he may earn from month to month as member of Parliament, cabinet minister, or writer.

Literally he takes no thought for the morrow. His needs are the same whether he sits on the

Government front bench, or on any other bench, and whatever money comes in leaves his pocket daily to supply the needs of others. He will never be cured of this; and why should he be? Money to him personally has no value at all, and I doubt very much whether he has ever had a balance at the bank. It would be a poor service to persuade him at seventy-five to "put a bit away for a rainy day."

## XX

### A WORD ABOUT EXPERTS

ALTHOUGH father is sceptical of experts, he does not belittle knowledge, or authority derived from knowledge. He has several times submitted his body cheerfully to the surgeon, and if he wanted a house built he would, if he could afford to do so, employ the best architect. These are practical experts who have to stand or fall by their work. The expert he cannot stand is the expert statesman or politician who proceeds from one blunder to another and instead of hiding his head in shame still calls upon the world to hearken and obey.

As quite a young man it was the social reformer of the Toynbee Hall type who earned his wrath. He met them as a poor law guardian and always denounced their peeping and prying into the homes of the very poor. Their object of course was to prove to the Guardians that there was no need for public assistance; so if there was a rather nice bed, or sofa, let alone piano, they would always put pressure upon the applicant for relief to pawn or sell rather than become paupers. They were justly hated for their inquisitorial methods practised indiscriminately upon the sick, the aged, and the indigent

poor in general. Their work was loudly praised by employers and large ratepayers who wanted low rates and cheap labour. His own admirable summary of the achievements of Canon Barnett at the Toynbee Hall settlement is worth quoting at length<sup>1</sup>

Men who went in training under the Barnetts, and those who later came under the spell of the Webbs, could always be sure of government and municipal appointments. The number is legion of those who, after a few months, or at the most a year or two, at Toynbee, have discovered themselves as experts on social affairs and, on the reputation created by the atmosphere and surroundings of the settlement, claimed and received very fine appointments. The one solid achievement of Toynbee Hall, and the most important result of the mixing policy of the Barnetts, has been the filling up of the bureaucracy of government and administration with men and women who went to East London full of enthusiasm and zeal for the welfare of the masses, and discovered the advancement of their own interests and the interests of the poor were best served by leaving East London to stew in its own juice while they became members of Parliament, cabinet ministers, civil servants; people who, after leaving East London, discovered the problems of life and poverty were too complex to solve and that palliatives must not cost money; that, after all, the poor in a lump were bad and reform and progress must be very gradual; that the rich were as necessary as the poor—indeed—that nothing must ever be done to hurt the good-hearted rich who keep such places as Toynbee Hall going out of their ill-gotten gains.

In any case, my fifty years' experience in East London leaves me quite unable to discover what permanent social

<sup>1</sup> *My Life*, by George Lansbury (Constable).



influence Toynbee Hall or any other similar settlement has had on the life and labour of the people.

Again, in the *Week End Review* of February 25th, 1933, he has a few things to say about the Charity Organisation Society, with which Toynbee Hall is closely associated.

Mr. Pringle talks of looking after hard cases and succouring them individually: I have seldom been able to discover a case considered hard enough with which the members of the Charity Organisation Society were willing to deal. That Society, as I have said many times, exists for one purpose and one purpose only, and that is so to organise charity that it ceases to exist.

With regard to Mr. Pringle's argument that we must consider unemployment benefit, transitional payments and Poor Law relief scales as equitable because of the present position of national finances, this, in my judgment, is ludicrous. The warehouses of the country are full of goods; there is abundant labour power to produce ever-increasing abundance. The world is suffering not from lack of goods but lack of brain power to provide a scheme for the distribution of these goods.

Finally, in a Christian state of society—which is the one I believe in—if there were a shortage, then we should all suffer together. As I said in the House of Commons some weeks ago, and as I have said during the whole of my public life, in a Christian society no person would have two homes until every person was able to secure one; no person would be allowed luxurious food until everybody was able to secure the food necessary for sustaining a decent standard of life. Most people of the class to which Mr. Pringle belongs take two dinners a day—one they call luncheon and the other they call dinner. There are masses

of our people who do not get even one. And I repeat, in a Christian society this sort of thing could not happen in the midst of abundance.

To-day his wrath is reserved for the experts who have led the country into such a financial and economic mess that industry cannot function, commodities rot in warehouses, and the people starve. Nothing angers him more than the contemptuous attitude of, say, Winston Churchill, who seldom sits through ordinary humdrum debates in the House of Commons, but makes an appearance in his own good time, delivers an oration, and departs.

He may be witty and clever (with his education and opportunities it would be surprising if he were not), his periods may be perfectly balanced, his efforts timed with the utmost precision, but nothing will persuade father that he is entitled to treat the House in this manner.

During the debate in December, 1932, on the question of the American Debt Settlement, the statesmen who had made what was considered a disastrous settlement for Great Britain spent the evening trying to put the blame on each other. Mr. Lloyd George, Sir Robert Horne, Sir Austen Chamberlain, Mr. Baldwin, Mr. Neville Chamberlain were all involved, and, being an important occasion, Mr. Churchill added his mite. Father spoke at the end of the debate and took the opportunity of saying what he thought about certain prominent members of

the House. He said: (according to *The Times*, December 15th, 1932):

The House had heard a wrangle between right honourable gentlemen who did not attend regularly and took no interest in the proceedings except when they could make long speeches. To come there and descend to the squabble which had taken place was a disgrace to Parliament. (Mr. Churchill—"Rubbish".) If he had such a code of honour as those right hon. gentlemen attributed to one another early in the debate he would not be found dead with them. (Laughter).

At this point Mr. Churchill interjected again and called forth the following retort:

If the vulgar nonsense we heard from you and your right hon. friends is the code of honour of Oxford and Cambridge, I thank God I belong to the East of London. The question of reparations is one long story of the ineptitude of the experts. They say that they only acted on the advice they were given. Any fool could do that. Half a dozen navvies out of Poplar would have come to a better conclusion any day.

This is unedifying but honest. Winston Churchill personifies the spirit of the real rulers of England to-day—their determination to hold on at all costs to their privileges, their wealth, their power. Ease and luxury, pomp and ceremony mean everything to them. That England should ever change as Russia has changed is unthinkable. Churchill is a

dictator in the making, and when the complete collapse of capitalism in England takes place he will be the first to lead the counter-revolution. I am sure father perceives all this, and would make an exception in Churchill's case to his usual disclaimer that he blames the system, not individuals, for the existence of the class war.

I think father is justified up to the hilt in his criticism of the self-constituted political experts who have had control of the country's affairs since the war. Let us consider step by step the course they have pursued only in connection with indemnities or "reparations". Hardly had the last shot been fired in 1918 when the statesmen of the allied countries began to tell the people of their plans for making the Germans pay. First of all she was to pay every penny of the cost of the war and very heavy damages besides. This was going to amount to an astronomical figure, and the noughts no doubt pleased politicians and people even if they gave the experts food for thought.

Mr. Lloyd George promised England that he would search the Germans' pockets for the "last farthing". Poor "uneducated" working-class people like George Lansbury and a few well-educated ones besides, argued that it was impossible for such colossal sums to be taken by one country from another without bringing disaster to both. They were laughed to scorn. So the experts went on with their calculations. They decided that Germany should pay £6,000,000,000 by way of reparations, and at once

the various allied countries decided to pay their debts to one another out of this respectable sum.

The scheme broke down, however, when someone said that in order to pay reparations Germany was borrowing money from America. The borrowed money was paid to the Allies who were thus able to pay back part of their own indebtedness to America. The experts got to work again and in 1924 under the Dawes Plan, Germany's liability was reduced to a capital figure of £2,000,000,000. Under the influence of these enormous payments the foundations of the financial world were beginning to rock; the American Stock Exchange collapse of 1929 came about, followed by world-wide chaos and confusion.

The experts got together and once again revised their figures. Now they pretended to some degree of accuracy and decided that £1,600,000,000 was about as much as Germany could shoulder and yearly payments were arranged accordingly. This was the Young Plan. It was supposed to be the very last word on the subject. The world depression became more and more acute, bankruptcies in all countries were the order of the day, commodity prices dropped lower and lower; in America thousands of tons of wheat were burned in a frantic effort to keep prices up while Americans stood in bread queues and peasants and workers in other parts of the world starved. The Brazilian coffee crop was burned for the same reason.

The experts met once more, and in 1931 the

Lausanne Conference fixed £150,000,000 as the ultimate maximum liability to which Germany should be exposed in respect of reparations. It will be seen that it took more than ten years for the experts to learn their lesson, that the world was brought to ruin in the meantime, and that even now they cannot grasp the truth that if £6,000,000,000 was a gigantic mistake, £150,000,000 is a big mistake too.

Wars were different in the days of Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar, when the victors carried off and shared amongst themselves the actual wealth of the country in the form of camels, sheep, gold and silver, women and slaves. Under modern industrial conditions wealth is created by the continuous processes of industry, and if England is flooded with cheap German goods sent over in the guise of reparation payments, the result is unemployment among English workmen.

It is argued on behalf of the experts that they realized all along the impossibility of extracting these huge sums from Germany, but that it was necessary to make some pretence of trying in order to silence the demand for vengeance set up by soldiers and civilians alike. I don't believe it. The whole story is the biggest exposure of the expert financier-statesman that the world has ever witnessed, putting in the shade the relatively minor blunders and tragedies of the war period itself, as disclosed in the *Lloyd George Memoirs*, the *Addison Diaries*, and similar recent publications.

When father says that half a dozen navvies from Poplar would make a better settlement than the allied statesmen made after the war, he means it. After consideration of all the facts one cannot imagine how they could have made a worse. He has a long and intimate experience of public work with ordinary working men as colleagues. The Poplar Borough Council, of which he was the first Labour Mayor, consisted almost entirely of labourers, engineers, postmen, bricklayers, and other types of skilled or unskilled workmen, together with a few working-class women.

They conducted the affairs of the Borough quite efficiently with an annual expenditure of more than a million pounds. If rates were high, it was mainly because of the heavy demands of the Guardians in connection with Poor Law relief. They certainly made no blunders commensurate in magnitude with the reparations blunder.

Another type of expert whom father detests is the conventional diplomat. Here again he sees a class of man, educated at public schools and universities employing their gifts and opportunities in a manner which would be considered disgraceful in any other calling. Discussing the Peace Treaties he says:<sup>1</sup>

It is quite certain that if secret diplomacy, secret discussions and treaties were abolished, war would be impossible. There is no nation in the world who would sanction for a single moment the lying, make-believe,

<sup>1</sup> *My Life*, by George Lansbury (Constable).

dishonesty and treachery which goes on under the name of diplomacy. Good, clean-living, honest-dealing men in private life, become double-faced, downright liars when dealing with international affairs.

Speaking of Colonel House, who was President Wilson's right hand man during the Peace Conference, he says:

He was an honest, clear-thinking man, and came to Europe never dreaming he was to enter an "International Thieves' kitchen", but expecting to treat with honest men—and so he did if we think only of private life—but he discovered what all who dabble in foreign affairs discover in time, that men who would rather die than lie and cheat for money, will do both when they imagine their nation's interest demands it.



FATHER believes and says that for political and economic purposes, as well as for the everyday affairs of life, the man in the street is the equal of the member of Parliament and the cabinet minister. If he credits the latter with more brains or better brains he thinks they use them in the wrong way so that instead of making things clear and smoothing things out they muddle things up and make confusion worse confounded. Definitely he believes that unsophisticated working men and women, faced with the absurdity of destitution in the midst of plenty, would go straight to the root of the matter and very soon devise ways and means for putting an end to the paradox. He has a profound distrust of, if not contempt for, political and economic experts, not because they are not clever, but because they are too clever. They cancel one another out. They would be more convincing if, like good arithmeticians, they all got their sums right. But like duffers at school they get different answers. They have their own economic theories and their own pet remedies for suffering humanity, and while they

demolish one another's theories and ridicule one another's remedies humanity goes on suffering.

One of the common people as defined at the beginning of chapter I, noting that home grown fruit and vegetables, and North Sea herrings, are sold in retail shops for something like ten times as much as the price paid to the farmer and the fisherman, would say that there was something radically wrong with the methods employed to link the farmer and the fisherman with the housewife and her hungry children. Economics aside, the remedy would be simple. But the expert can never see the food and the hungry children. He can only see the economic laws favoured by his own school of thought which to him are as sound and inexorable as the laws of nature. He thinks in terms of foreign exchanges, the gold standard, the "iron law of wages", and the law of "supply and demand". Hungry people may have a "moral" demand but not what he calls an "effective" demand.

The expert believes in cause and effect, but cannot see the connection between mountains of rotting food and millions of underfed people. The common people do see and understand these things and if they do not rise up and put them right at once it is because there are too many forces at work dividing them into sections and factions. The general elections of 1924 and 1929 are illustrations of this.

Father had a few words to say on these matters when given the opportunity of broadcasting (on the 19th October, 1933) on "The futility of the National

Government". He began his talk characteristically enough by declining to follow Mr. Baldwin in his defence of the National Government, and continued:

I may, however, remind listeners that riches and poverty, millionaires and paupers, slums and palaces, unemployment, destitution and crime, are the inevitable outcome of a social system based on usury, rent and private profit.

This statement illustrates exactly his attitude to the problems facing the community to-day. The social system rests upon an industrial system which in turn is based upon usury, rent and private profit, and is fundamentally unsound. Orthodox party politicians both within and outside the Labour Movement might have expected him to follow Mr. Baldwin's previous speech clause by clause, scoring many verbal and debating points. But in father's view the chance of addressing millions of listeners in every part of the world was not to be thrown away as though it was a matter of addressing a handful of somnolent old gentlemen and ignorant young gentlemen in the House of Commons. He knew that his words would reach many thousands of homes in England where the mere carving up of one politician's arguments by another politician would result in a prompt application of the cut-out. Boom and slump follow each other monotonously whether the government be "National" or "Labour".

The Labour Government had had no more power to affect the ebb and flow of trade and commerce,

riches and poverty, than had the National Government. He would not therefore attempt to show that when Labour statesmen were directing affairs conditions of trade and employment were better. Nor would he essay the hopeless task of proving that such men as Henderson, Clynes, Cripps, Greenwood, Attlee and himself were cleverer at the political game than Baldwin, Simon, the Chamberlains, Churchill, Amery and the rest. In his view, the greatest mistake ever made by the Labour Government was the attempt to show that the affairs of the nation could be managed under capitalism as competently by Socialists as by Tories. He always said that the Tories made the best Capitalist Governments. "Let the Tories do the tory work, and let us do the socialist work." He would therefore let his opponents score every party point. Let them quote figures to show that unemployment was gradually decreasing under their régime; one had only to wait a while and the inevitable slump would ensue, revealing the transitoriness of prosperity for the workers under capitalism. Let them take what credit they could from their record of pacts, treaties, agreements, understandings made with the great and little powers of the world. Shortly, as things were going, the whole edifice of lies, hypocrisy, humbug and beggar-my-neighbour in general would come crashing about the ears of those who were supposed to be working for peace, international goodwill, and justice between nations.

So he went on with his broadcast, arraigning not only his opponents, but his friends:

Up to the present time, all governments, *including the government of which I was a member*, dependent as they are for their existence on those who support Capitalism, have attempted to reconcile that which is impossible of reconciliation.

. . . the workers who assist in productive work are denied the use of the goods they produce. Miners see their children shivering in the cold of winter while outside their homes are thousands of tons of the coal they have helped to produce.

I ask those who profess and call themselves Christians to face up to this dilemma in which Capitalist society and Capitalist governments have landed us. Priests, bishops, ministers, urge their congregations to pray for God's blessing on the labour of our brain and hands, and when in answer to these prayers, *or otherwise* [what a man he is for placating those who don't believe as he does], a bountiful return comes in the form of a bumper harvest and huge production in every sphere of industrial enterprise, those who control finance and our whole economic life, tell us that God or Nature has made a mistake, that food-stuffs must be burned, that cotton must be ploughed back into the soil, that further production must be restricted and millions of people suffer privation and want.

This sort of talk is a smashing blow as much against Labour tinkerers and careerists as against Tories and Liberals. It will help to ensure that Labour will never again find itself in power except by the votes of those who will expect the resulting government to set about the task of abolishing Capitalism and introducing Socialism. The argument that such a change cannot be brought about by the waving of a wand, or that it is incredible that we

should go to bed one night in a capitalist community and wake up next morning in a socialist community has lost a great deal of its force since changes equally great have been accomplished, not indeed in a night or by the waving of a wand, but in a few months and by the energetic measures of a few conscientious men. Whether those men are dictators or democrats is beside the point. Russia, Italy, Germany, and America are illustrations. Even in Turkey the habits, customs, religion, superstitions, even the very clothes of a whole people have been revolutionized in a decade under the influence of the glowing enthusiasm and single-mindedness of Mustapha Kemal. The accomplishments of great dictators and great tyrants, though not of the same kind, may be equalled in magnitude by the accomplishments of socialists.

Arthur Henderson is generally and I think rightly regarded in the Labour Movement as a supporter of the policy of gradualness described by Lord Passfield as inevitable. No one expects him ever to say or do anything without weighing carefully the risks and the probable effects. Furthermore, shortly before father delivered his speech, Henderson had been returned to the House of Commons amid widespread controversy as to the future leadership of the Labour Party. There were many (not many in the Parliamentary party, but many among the gossip writers in the Press) who had maintained ever since father became leader, that he held the position merely as a stopgap until some of the more stable right-wingers reappeared in Parliament. There were

rumours (lying jades, of course) that violent quarrels had occurred between Henderson and father on the subject. In the following letter written from Geneva shortly after father's speech, there is little evidence of "violent quarrels," but a very graceful tribute from one old friend to another:

League of Nations,  
Hotel de la Paix,  
Geneva.

October 20, 1933.

MY DEAR G.L.,

Mrs. Henderson and I had a great treat last night. We were listening in to both your statements, and the astonishing thing was that, at this great distance, your voice was so crystal clear that we could not have heard you more distinctly if we had been listening in the room in which your speeches were delivered.

Moreover, your speeches enabled me to realize more than ever the value of every opportunity being obtained for broadcasting. For when we remember the vast number of listeners to whom you would be speaking we can only conclude that Socialism and peace were being expounded to possibly your largest audience. And I want to offer my sincere congratulations as it was really an inspiration to both Mrs. Henderson and myself.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR HENDERSON.

Father's main criticism of Henderson was that he could not serve two masters: that he could not serve his constituency in the House of Commons and do the work of the League of Nations at Geneva.

Needless to add, that if Henderson neglects thankless work in the House of Commons, it is to do work which he regards as of supreme importance not only to his own constituents but to the whole world. But this is not easy to explain to those who want to hear their member's voice raised on their own behalf in the House of Commons.

There was never any quarrel as to the leadership of the party and so far as father is concerned there never will be. He will remain leader for just as long as he thinks he can serve the Movement in that capacity. To quarrel or intrigue in order to keep the position would be alien to his nature. He is maintained in the position by those who think the best interests of the Labour Party are served by his continued leadership.

A few days after father's speech the *Star* newspaper interviewed him on the subject of peace, with the following result:

(The *Star*, Monday, October 23, 1933):

A *Star* reporter put the question to-day, "What would you do if you were Dictator?" He said in reply: "I would close every recruiting station, disband the Army, dismantle the Navy, and dismiss the Air Force. I would abolish the whole dreadful equipment of war, and say to the world: 'Do your worst'. I believe it would do its best.

"England would not become a third-class power, as some people think. She would be the greatest, the strongest, and the safest country in the world.



"That may sound no more than a paradox, but I believe it is true. If it is not true, then all the world's teachers have been wrong, and every Christian church should shut its doors.

"Mind you, I speak only for myself. I am not fool enough to think that the whole Labour Movement would agree with me in this view.

"But the people have got to save themselves. In the past they have been swept into war because they were frightened. To-day they are more frightened of what they will suffer if they go to war than of what will happen to them if they do not.

"To attain the ideal of peace they must make sacrifices. England must give up all thought of active Imperialism.

"We must make that gesture, whatever the cost, though I do not think it would be heavy. I believe that England without a weapon in her hands, would still keep the Empire under her flag.

"In the near future the Labour Movement is going to launch a great peace campaign to stir the people to the necessity of action. The trade unions have agreed to get together and try to discover the best means of stopping a threatened war.

"But if armaments have been piled up, what will prevent the use of them? I would like to see the workers of every country refuse to make the foul weapons of modern war and risk starving rather than lend a finger to this devil's work."

"Do you think such a general strike possible even in one country?" he was asked.

"All things are possible to those who believe," replied Mr. Lansbury with a touch of sadness.

The scepticism of the interviewer is noticeable, yet, old as he is, father may yet live to see his practical

plan for making war impossible accepted. For if the means by which wars are waged are not scrapped the civilised peoples of the world, despite the spread of culture and scientific and industrial attainments, may be wiped out by the universal and indiscriminate employment of poison and disease in the ultimate clash of the nations.

On the same day the *Evening News* contributed the following:

#### OLD MUDDLEHEAD.

“Uncle” George Lansbury has the kindest heart and the most addled brain in English politics, and it is quite impossible to get worked up over anything the poor old dear says. Last night he was appealing to the young men of this country not to join the armed forces of the Crown and not to “let their minds be full of hatred for other people”.

This idea that armed forces beget hatred is the purest balderdash. Mr. Lansbury and his Socialist friends have generated more hatred than all the armies of Europe rolled into one, and the fact that it is class hatred and not race hatred makes not a pennyworth of difference. It is the unarmed not the armed peoples that to-day are doing most of the hating. Many of them have grievances against their neighbours that ought to be redressed.

There will, of course, always be a margin of grievances and of hate in the world because perfect justice is unattainable and would not be appreciated if it were attained. The essential futility of the League of Nations is due to the false expectation that (a) it could achieve perfect international justice and (b) its decisions would be acceptable all round.

In connection with domestic affairs he had been acclaimed "champion of the people's liberties". He had performed his duties as First Commissioner of Works with diligence, courage, and conspicuous ability, and had earned almost universal commendation. The *Evening News* itself had announced boldly "We want more Lansburys", but on the subject of disarmament and international peace and goodwill he was just "Old Muddlehead".

I will do the *Evening News* the justice of quoting once again from their columns:

#### THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

Everybody, no matter what his politics, will sympathise with Mr. George Lansbury and wish him a speedy recovery.

We think very little of Mr. Lansbury's politics but a great deal of his deep sincerity, his kindly and unassuming personality and the courage and industry which he brings to the thankless task of leading the Labour Party through the dismal wilderness of Opposition.

Nor do we forget that when Labour *was* in power "Uncle" George Lansbury earned the gratitude of the public as First Commissioner of Works and when it fell was the one Minister to retire with laurels.

(This note was written on December 11th, 1933, just after father had met with a serious accident.)

It is not to be wondered at that father is an enigma to leader writers and news-producers. He is sincere in all things. If you laugh at him for wanting to close recruiting stations, disband the army, dismantle the

navy and dismiss the air force, you must laugh at Jesus who said similar things *mutatis mutandis*. "But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." "And if any man shall sue thee at the law and take away thy coat let him have thy cloke also." In short, he is a practical Christian and believes that practical Christianity would solve the world's outstanding problems. In his view complete and absolute disarmament is the only way to achieve world peace and the sooner one great power leads the way, the sooner will the dread of War, with its scientifically administered poison, disease, and famine be banished from the minds of the people.

While George Lansbury is Leader of the British Labour Movement there will never be another Labour Government with an inferiority complex. Financiers, economists, industrial magnates will not dictate the terms upon which the Government can hold office, nor will permanent officials be allowed to say what can or what cannot be done. The first work of that Government will be to distribute the masses of surplus commodities amongst the destitute and ensure that such surpluses are never accumulated again.

I have said that father believes in "the common people"; he is never tired of saying so. It is not to be wondered at, then, that those who look upon election to the House of Commons or inclusion in the cabinet as a proof of intellectual superiority get annoyed when he talks to them from the Front

Bench in the same language and with the same arguments as those he employs at meetings of working men. To use his own quaint phrase, he talks to them "like a Dutch uncle". I have never met a "Dutch Uncle", but one can imagine what the phrase means without knowing how it came to mean it.

## XXII

### FRIENDS

ALTHOUGH father has few intimate or personal friends, there are tens of thousands who regard themselves as his friends, without being personal or intimate. He himself thinks of them as his friends although he may never see them more than once in a year. They are mostly workers in the Labour movement, or members of sympathetic organisations, and the friendship arises out of strenuous work for common ideals. They may be humble members of the party or well-to-do supporters; they may be navvies or employers of labour, churchwardens or bishops, villagers or slum-dwellers; wherever they live and whatever their calling they think of him as "George", "old George" or "good old George".

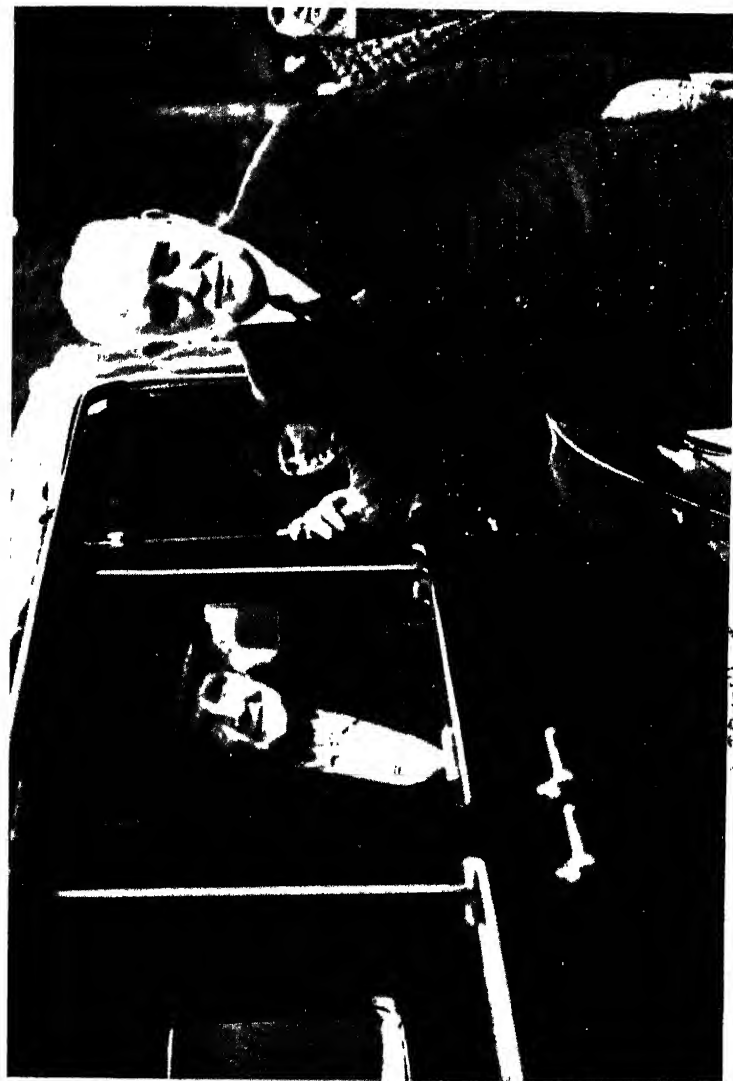
Wherever he goes he radiates warmth and good-fellowship. Even the man in the street who does not think of him in a personal way, would never dream of referring to him as "Lansbury". It would be as "Old George Lansbury", "old Lansbury" or "Old George"—a form of reference having nothing to do with age, but indicating a personal acquaintance with his work and public character if not of his

personality. In the east end of London there are thousands who see much more of him; they attend his meetings and by their enthusiasm and love help to keep the lamp of his own faith burning in days of loss and defeat.

On election days, whether we are successful or not, they form up after the count and escort him to his home. Talking to them from an upper bedroom window he makes them feel an almost physical bond along which currents of understanding and loyalty flow. These are his intimate moments; if he cannot reveal his inmost soul to a friend, he can reveal it to his friends. And while he talks to them in the simple language which they understand so well, mother stands behind him in the low-ceilinged bedroom, anxious and worried because of the hoarseness of his voice, his clothes damp with perspiration, and the dangerously cold night air. Or at least she used to do so before she died.

He always spoke of her part in his life and work; a part which kept her behind the curtains, occasionally looking through or between them, but always out of sight. The people used to love her to show herself, though they knew she would be tongue-tied; and they would give her the greatest cheer of all. She was simple like them, and like them, humble. They knew themselves what it was like to be behind the curtain.

The fire of his spirit would be reflected from the shining eyes and eager faces of his friends, who at last with many a final "good night, George," would



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FATHER AND MOTHER, ABOUT 1930



turn their steps homewards with more courage and greater faith for the morrow.

Among the orthodox leaders of the party he moves without assurance and with many misgivings. As he puts it himself he was never "on visiting terms" with them. In the Cabinet he was on terms of friendship with all his colleagues, but would hardly number one as a personal friend. The nature of his political work, his character, and his earlier experience of life were all against the formation of close personal ties. As a young man he was too serious minded to make friends among his fellow-workmen; although on occasion he could be hearty and boisterous, there was no convivial side to him. After work, he bolted off to his meetings or to his home. When it was home, he wanted to rest in the atmosphere of wife and family.

Later on, during long years of ceaseless propaganda in every part of the country, he would finish his speech and, instead of putting up for the night at the local hotel or with a local supporter, would dash for the last train and make for home. For him there was "no place like home". It was the only place where he was at home. It was not unusual for him to arrive at Euston or King's Cross at three or four o'clock in the morning and walk home to Bow, where "Bessie" would be up and waiting for him with the inevitable pot of tea on the hob and perhaps his Sunday dinner on a plate over a steaming saucepan.

Occasionally, but rarely, he would drive in a hansom-cab, but only because the driver had seen

and recognised him, and brought him down free or for a greatly reduced fare. He seldom or never took mother out to dinner at restaurants; and when he talked things over with his political friends or opponents the talk would take place in his office and not over lunch, breakfast or dinner. "Dining out" is an outlandish custom which he doesn't in the least understand. At homes he eats "what is put in front of him"; if he has to lunch or dine anywhere else he chooses only the most simple dish. And as for drinking, he will call to the waiter: "Brother, bring me a jug of Adam's ale." In the buffets of the House of Commons his favourite morceau is a cold custard in a small pot which costs 2d. or 3d. Among his children, I for one feel more than a trace of uneasiness about dining out though I do so whenever I can and whenever invited. It feels all wrong, and this I am sure is due to father's example and our upbringing.

His relations with MacDonald during the period of the second Labour Government were always friendly but formal. Within the party, he had always found himself opposed to MacDonald's methods and tactics, and sometimes the division was acute. Long before the war, on the question of woman's suffrage, they disagreed with disastrous results for father, though not for the cause of woman's emancipation. Before the militant campaign of the Woman's Social and Political Union had started, the burning question was whether the Labour Party in the House of Commons would vote with the

Tories in order to throw out the Liberal Government.

MacDonald, although a supporter of woman's suffrage would never agree to this course, and was supported by the great majority of the Labour members, who cared little about woman's suffrage but a great deal for the security of the party and the safety of their seats in the House of Commons.

Ultimately on this question father resigned his seat in the House of Commons and appealed to the electors of Bow and Bromley to re-elect him on the one question of Votes for Women. They rejected his appeal, converting his majority of about a thousand into a minority. Their argument was quite simple; we elected George Lansbury to represent us in the House of Commons and he has thrown up the job. Right O! we will elect someone who will stay there when we send him. During the election campaign all talk of principle and of the need for directing attention to the grievances of women achieved nothing, and father remained out of the House of Commons from 1912 until 1922.

On most of the questions which arose for discussion within the party father and MacDonald were on opposite sides. Father was rash, impulsive, and uncompromising; MacDonald was cautious, cool, and above all a compromiser. Their relative attitudes were aptly illustrated in the House of Commons one day in 1910. Father was making a scene about the Cat and Mouse Act; the Speaker was getting ready to "name" him, and members were

shouting him down from all quarters. MacDonald was literally tugging at his coat-tails and yelling, "Sit down, George," with all the lung power at his command. Of course, father did not sit down and in due course was suspended.

Father has figured in many a scene of this kind, and to this day looks without disfavour on younger members enthusiastic and impatient enough to do the same sort of thing. Although eminent politically he is not sufficiently of the hierarchy to condemn the modern expression of the spirit of his younger days.

## XXIII

### THE MEANS TEST AND PARTY POLICY

ALTHOUGH the term "means test" has only been current during the past few years, the test of the means of applicants for public assistance has been in operation since the very beginning of the Poor Law in the reign of Elizabeth. Obviously, if you want to relieve the destitute you must ascertain who are destitute, and this implies a test of means. Whether this test is as to the applicant's own personal means, or the means of relatives to whom he might reasonably look for assistance is not material; for the division to-day is between those who advocate a test of destitution and those who believe only in testing the applicant's capacity and willingness to work.

Father was a Poor Law Guardian for over forty years, and in company with all other Poor Law Guardians had to administer a means test. Socialists of all hues, from the deepest red to the palest pink had to do the same. In order to be right with the public and with themselves, however, all forms of activity in connection with local government were grouped in one category—palliatives—suitable for employment by Socialists only as accompaniments

to vigorous action for the overthrow of Capitalism. The sin against the holy ghost was to make palliatives an end in themselves.

There were many in the Social Democratic Federation as there are now in the Communist Party who held that all palliatives were harmful in that they served to make Capitalism more tolerable for the masses and thus postponed the day of reckoning. They wanted to abandon everything except socialist propaganda and await the moment when, maddened by hunger, the people would rise up and humble their oppressors. But it is safe to say that not a single Socialist or Communist would find a seat on a local Council or in the House of Commons unless, besides advocating Socialism, he stood for such palliatives as slum-clearance and re-housing, improved education, better roads and lighting, a reasonable standard of maintenance for the destitute, etc.

Since the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 parents have been liable for the maintenance of their children whether able-bodied or not until they were adults; even adult children, if sick or mentally deficient, had to be maintained by their parents, according to their means. Similarly, children were liable to help maintain parents if sick or otherwise unable to maintain themselves. These laws, whether actually embodied in the Act or laid down by orders of the Ministry of Health had been operated by Guardians of the Poor, as they are now operated by the Public Assistance Committees of the County Councils, whether controlled by Socialists or Tories.

But the term "means test" has now taken on a much more sinister meaning. It has come to mean a reckoning up of the income of a whole family so that it may be ascertained whether one or two of that family, whether able-bodied or not, may be granted unemployment pay or "the dole" as it is called. Under this test a scale is laid down and if the family income, whether derived from the work of children or parents, from old age pensions or service pensions, exceeds a certain figure per head, then no member of that family is eligible for unemployment pay, or any other form of public assistance.

Both in the Cabinet and in the House of Commons, father fought against this drastic modern means test. As a Guardian of the Poor he knew what wretchedness and misery would result from it. A young unemployed man is compelled to share his widowed mother's meagre income from old age pension or service pension; another may have to share his father's disability pension and his brother's or sister's wages. In these days young men and women fortunate enough to be in regular work and earning say thirty shillings or two pounds a week expect a little recreation (they may even want to save up to get married) and resent bitterly a plan which brings their conditions down to a uniform standard of misery, which may be below the subsistence level.

Father has been attacked both by Tories and by Maxton (one cannot say "the Maxton group" any more) as though he originated the "means test". Nothing could be more absurd. In Poplar, until

all Boards of Guardians were abolished, we did all we could to mitigate the hardships involved in applying the Poor Law, and discouraged officials in their efforts to collect money from the relatives of those receiving relief. But what father did maintain was that he would not give money for ever to an applicant for public assistance without enquiring into that man's means, not the means of his sons or daughters, or father or mother, but his own personal means. The reader might consider this reasonable enough, and even socialistic enough; nevertheless it has called down upon father's head the most bitter personal attacks from two or three members of Parliament who occupy a position in which nobody will ever be able to judge how they would deal with this or any other practical problem.

Such critics are as safe as the deputation of unemployed workers who waited upon the Poplar Guardians a few years ago. The Guardians were being vilified in the Press, and surcharged by the Ministry of Health because of the extravagance of their scale of relief for able-bodied unemployed men and women. The deputation seized that moment to demand that the unemployed worker should be paid £4 a week without consideration of his means, and irrespective of the number of unemployed in one family. The Guardians refused to comply with this fatuous request and were denounced on the street corners and in the journal of the communist party as renegades, reactionaries and traitors.

Those hectic Poplar days of 1920-1927 will never



recur. Both the Council and the Board of Guardians were controlled by Socialists, headed by father. Under his influence a tremendous attempt was made to translate election pledges into concrete achievements. Milk, glaxo, and other nourishing foods were given to nursing and expectant mothers free of charge without reference to the Poor Law. Orders were issued to owners of slum property to put houses in a state fit for human habitation—and if such orders were not complied with, the Council itself did the necessary repairs and sent the account to the landlord for payment.

The Guardians laid down and applied a scale of relief for the destitute (whether able-bodied or not) which in a very large number of cases resulted in idle families living on a far higher level (as regards material needs) than families in which one or more were at work. This was no secret. The Press published the ghastly details daily, and loudly called upon the Government to intervene. In the end intervention came, but not in the affairs of Poplar alone. Poor Law Guardians were abolished and their work transferred to the County Councils. Successive Governments had found it impossible adequately to control the administrative actions of Boards of Guardians, and finally decided to abolish them.

Lord and Lady Passfield spent many years of their lives agitating for the abolition of the Poor Law and the scrapping of Boards of Guardians with the idea of bettering the conditions of the sick, the aged, the destitute and the unemployed. Most

important still, they wanted to wipe out the "pauper taint" connected with public assistance. Father agreed with them. Yet now that the Poor Law and the Guardians are wiped out, the lot of the poor is immeasurably worse. I do not think the poor mind very much whether assistance comes from Guardians, county councils, or the government. The "taint of pauperism" has lost a lot of its colour now that it is not accompanied by the loss of the vote.

I remember a debate between father and Harry Quelch (a leader of the old Social Democratic Federation) in the Holborn Town Hall on this very subject a few years before the war. Father was supporting the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law and was all for taking the unemployed entirely out of the Poor Law atmosphere and providing them with work or maintenance through the medium of the newly-formed labour exchanges: but Quelch maintained that the abolition of the Poor Law would result in throwing the poor into the hands of reactionary borough and county councils. On this matter I think history proves Quelch to have been right. The county councils have always been a stronghold of Toryism, and remain yet to be captured by the Socialists.

So far as the unemployed are concerned father now takes his stand with the majority of the Labour Party. He stands for work or maintenance, whether the unemployed is destitute or a millionaire. At a first glance this policy may seem fantastic, but it

is not. Society places certain extremely rigid restrictions upon the individual which do not apply in primitive or savage communities. The cave-man had no need to concern himself with the "means of life"; whatever he wanted he took, and if he ran a risk in taking it, that was all part of the game of life.

But modern Society will not permit the unemployed father of a family to seize what may be necessary for his own life and for the lives of his children. Society says, "If you want food, clothing, shelter and amusement you must work for them. And if you want work you must find an employer." So that the fishing and hunting of the cave-man is abolished, and the modern worker has to hunt for work. Nobody denies that for long periods no work is to be had, even by the most zealous. Hence the justice of the demand for work or maintenance.

Logically, if maintenance or work is not afforded the individual is within his rights in reverting to the ethics of the stone-age and taking what he wants. It is only a convention of Society that awards the greatest prize to the greatest brains. Formerly the prize went to the strongest. The aggregate brain of the masses may yet grasp this fact and act upon it.

So father stands for work or maintenance for the unemployed, and no means test of any kind. What he said yesterday or thirty years ago is immaterial. He is indeed nearly seventy-five; but he has not yet lost the faculty for marching with the times, and discarding the errors of yesterday. His

work as a Guardian has proved to him the impossibility of operating a means test fairly. For example, you immediately penalize the thrifty worker who may have been able to gather together a decent home or even to own a house. Two workers may be unemployed, both with families. One may own a piano, a wireless-set, and a decent suite of furniture; the other may have no piano, no wireless-set, and may sleep with his family in orange-boxes. The former may have been hard-working and thrifty and in receipt of good wages. The latter may have been hard-working and thrifty too, but miserably underpaid all through his life and unable to provide decently for his family even when in work. How will you judge between these two?

As father says, "the way to test whether a man is trying to get money under false pretences is to offer him a job." And again, "the community is responsible to the individual and the individual is responsible to the community". He has said these things on platforms and has written them in pamphlets.

He has reiterated them in the House of Commons. Nobody who knows him could doubt that as a member of the Cabinet he must have used every endeavour to compel the Prime Minister and his iron Chancellor to act in the spirit of their own Election Manifesto "Labour and the Nation", published in 1929.

Mr. Snowden was responsible for much of the actual wording of this manifesto. Indeed the type-

script of the following extracts bore amendments in his own handwriting:

“BRINGING OUT THE OLD BOGEY

“In order to hide their record of incompetence and reaction the Tory leaders are trying to frighten the electors with horrifying pictures of the disasters which would come upon the country if a Labour Government were returned.

“It was such discreditable tactics as this which secured the Tory majority at the last election. We have faith that the voters will not be misled a second time by such vile misrepresentations.

“THE ISSUE ACCORDING TO MR. BALDWIN

“Mr. Baldwin says that the issue of the coming Election will be between Constitutionalism and Socialism. We ask the electors not to be misled by misrepresentations of Socialism and the aims and policy of the Labour Party. The Labour Party is neither Bolshevik nor Communist. It is strongly opposed to force and revolution and confiscation as means of establishing the New Social Order. We believe in ordered progress and in democratic methods.

“HELPING THEIR FRIENDS

“To give remissions of taxation to their rich friends, they have robbed the funds of the workers' National Health Insurance Societies; they *have reduced unemployment benefits, and thrown tens of thousands of workless men and women on to the Poor Law.* They have stopped the grants formerly given to the Local Authorities for the provision of useful work for the unemployed; and have made successive raids

upon the Road Fund to give relief to the well-to-do income-tax and super-tax class."

*Thus Philip Snowden in 1929 before, as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Labour Government, he came under the heel of Bankers, Treasury officials, Montagu Norman and the other experts who so far had controlled the financial policy of Governments, whether Labour, Liberal or Tory, and who doubtless control the National Government to this day.*

After two years as Chancellor of the Exchequer Mr. Snowden had to contemplate the country among precisely the disasters foretold by the Tory leaders. Nevertheless he was able in a most astute manner to range himself alongside those whom two years previously he had so roundly abused and to join them in the work of cutting down the subsistence allowances of the unemployed, and reducing the pay of Civil Servants including those already miserably underpaid. He entered with relish into the task of smashing the party which he had done so much to build up, and making the country safe for plutocracy.

In the *Daily Herald* of October 23rd, 1931, father gave some hint of the clash within the ranks of the Government itself which Snowden's weakness as a Chancellor had caused, and shows clearly where he stood when proposals for imposing sacrifices upon the poor came under review<sup>1</sup>:—

"Philip Snowden has given the world his version of facts and statements connected with the break-up of the Labour Government. I desire to add a few others.

<sup>1</sup> Printed by kind permission of the *Daily Herald*, London.

"First, I have always had a personal regard for the Chancellor; but in Committees and in the Cabinet I have often been violently opposed to his policy.

"He is not a strong man. He is only obstinate. Once he has been told what to say and do by Treasury officials he never budes. . . .

"All through the life of the late Government Treasury officials obstructed and hindered the Ministers in their work. No one can deny this. Lloyd George was quite right when he said the Treasury and Bank of England always acted together, although the Bank of England is a private institution.

"Treasury officials act in this way because Cabinets allow them to do so. *They will be loyal to the first really strong Chancellor who controls instead of obeys them.* On the question of unemployment pay the Treasury was obstructionist from the start. Their opposition culminated in the odious evidence put before the Holman Gregory Committee by one of their officials, evidence which was never mentioned to the Cabinet till after it was given.

"Before this Committee was set up, the Treasury instructed the Chancellor to place before a committee of his colleagues a programme of cuts for the unemployed which in my opinion were more foul than that put forward by the May Committee. All men and women on transitional benefit were to be placed under the Poor Law. All benefit was to stop after twenty-six weeks. Contributions were to be increased and benefits decreased. So odious were these proposals, so indignantly were they repudiated by the Government Committee, that the documents on which the scheme was typed were all collected so as to save any exposure.

"Then came the May Committee which was appointed without special reference to Unemployment. The Treasury

officials saw their chance, and very ably took advantage of it. *This Committee took little or no interest in general economy. I could sit down and by simple elimination of waste in the number of high officials, and departmental overlapping, save millions of pounds and not hurt a single workman.*

"But the May Committee, skilfully guided by the same people who guided the Holman Gregory Committee, went out baldheaded for the unemployed, Government employees of all descriptions, and social services.

"On August 19th a scheme was outlined by the Chancellor which again proposed to hand over all persons who had received twenty-six weeks' benefit in a year to the Poor Law, without any reservation at all. It was estimated that this would save twenty millions a year. The bribe to local authorities was to be a grant of twenty-five millions spread over the whole country. It is estimated that transitional benefit costs at present forty-five millions. You will notice that by handing the millions of persons whose benefit is exhausted to the tender mercies of the Poor Law, the Treasury expected to save twenty millions. This would be saved at the cost of children's health.

"Of course the Cabinet smashed this proposal out of hand and we settled down to consider the other cuts, and decided to put these as *tentative proposals only to the Labour Party Executive, the Trades Union Congress, and the Consultative Committee.*

"The proof that these conclusions were purely tentative is that not only did Philip Snowden tell those bodies that unemployment payment would not be touched, but declared, in so many words, that the conclusions were not definite.

"Mr. Citrine confirmed this in his speech to the Trades Union Congress. . . .

"As the days passed, many proposals were discussed,



Henderson from the start taking his stand that before anything could be finally settled the Party must be summoned and the whole situation discussed. The Cabinet as a whole argued that the Budget must be balanced, though personally I am not as worried about this as some of my comrades. Our country is not bankrupt, nor likely to be; a set of gambling money-lenders may be smashed, but not our nation. . . .

"In addition, all the time, the Chancellor, acting for the bankers and on the order of the Treasury officials, insisted *no matter what economies we effected, no matter what scheme we proposed for taxing the rich, nothing would get the Bank of England the gold it needed unless the unemployed were victimised, and education, housing, and other social service expenditure stopped.*

"This is where we broke with the Chancellor, the Treasury and the Bankers.

"It is said we allowed the Prime Minister to take proposals, including a cut of ten per cent., to Liberals, Tories, and the Banks, and that when these were agreed to we ran away from our own proposals. This is misrepresentation pure and simple.

"We asked the Prime Minister beforehand: 'What will be our position if those with whom you are negotiating accept these proposals *which many of us will not accept.*'

"He said: 'I shall tell the Liberals, Tories and bankers that I am asking their approval, and that so far, the Cabinet *has not accepted them.*'

"When he came back with the kind approval of the Banks, and a message that Neville Chamberlain reserved himself the right to move a twenty per cent cut in unemployment benefit, those of us who from the start had been against the whole business stood our ground, and the Cabinet broke up.

"Remember, Liberals and Tories were allowed to see Banking magnates. The Cabinet, however, from first to last, was never allowed to meet these financial dictators face to face, neither did we see the Tories and Liberals; their conversations came to us second-hand.

"For myself, I refused to stick to the fleshpots of office and betray the poor on whose confidence and votes my whole public life depended. Also, as an Englishman, I refused to accept the blatant dictation of American and British bankers, led by the Bank of England and Treasury officials.

"We waited in Downing Street for telephone messages from New York. The Deputy-Governor of the Bank of England and some of his colleagues were in one committee room waiting, so they said, to receive the message, and a message was read to the Cabinet.

. . . . .

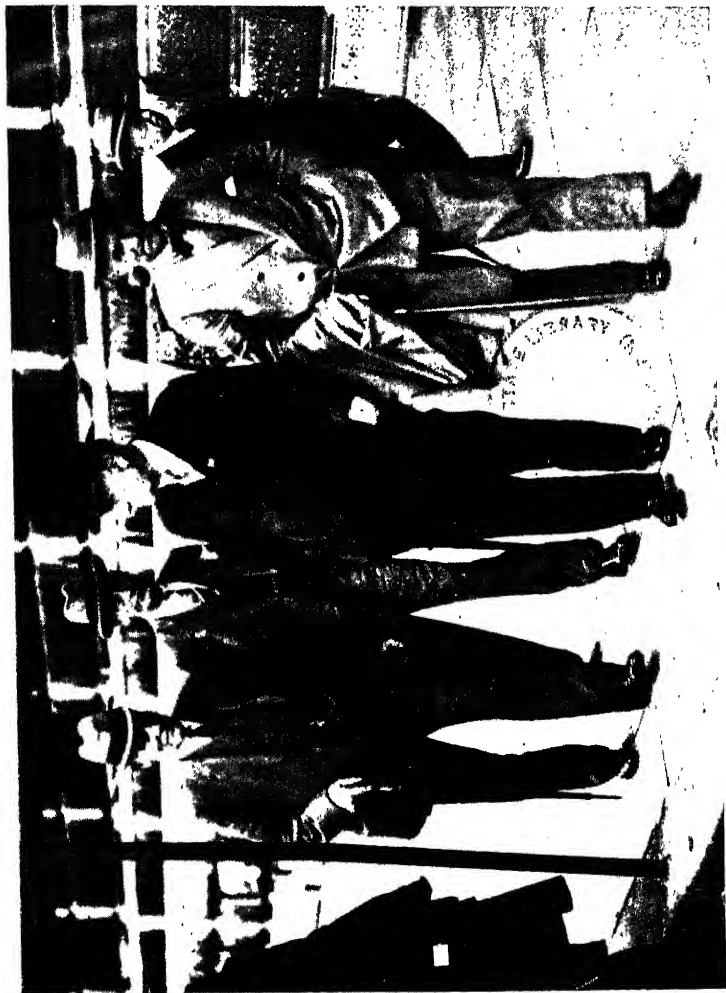
"In a world of abundance, the money-muddlers and greedy usurers demand that masses shall starve.

"We in Britain have often led the world in peaceful, ordered change. We can do it again."

. . . . .

All italics are mine.

The idea that father was perfectly happy getting on with his job at the Office of Works, looking after ancient monuments and inaugurating "Lansbury Lidos" is quite erroneous. The work which made him popular he took in his stride. Behind the scenes he tried to compel his colleagues to try at least to carry out their election programme and promises.



*[Reproduced by permission of Sport and General Press Agency, Ltd.]*

# THE FALL OF THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT

Leaving the last meeting of the Cabinet.

In my own opinion this work was largely responsible for the break up of the Government and the exposure of MacDonald and Snowden for what they show themselves to-day—the one a dithering and uncomfortable upholder of Toryism and the other a titled nobody.

It is often said that father may lead some future Labour Government. He will certainly never lead a Labour Government without the backing of a working majority of Labour Members in the House of Commons. Nor will he ever again become a member of a Labour Government which owes its tenure of office to the Liberal Party. But if he ever does lead a Labour Government I can vouch for one thing; he will stand by his programme and endeavour to carry out his promises. He will be as assiduous in urging his colleagues to carry out their election programme as MacDonald and Snowden were assiduous in applying the brake. If this means failure he will fail. But I think he will succeed.

Father has courage, faith and integrity. When his day comes he and those who stand with him will begin the practical work of establishing "Socialism in our time". Failure in this work may mean that the revolution of the communists will be at hand. Those who place financial obstacles in the way of a constitutional democratic government may very soon be brought to heel by "the dictatorship of the proletariat". Unemployed and underpaid workers will have nothing to fear from communism. To quote

Marx they have "nothing to lose but their chains" but "a world to gain".

The Labour Government of 1929-1931 fell, and on the face of it deserved to fall. In the first place it depended on anti-Labour votes for its very life, and from the beginning it was obvious that nothing could be done to upset the Liberals who, though weak numerically, had the power of life and death in their hands. MacDonald and Snowden were unwilling to do or to try anything. Doubtless they both felt very much in their element, MacDonald perambulating from place to place, greeted with thunderous applause in Paris, Berlin and New York, keeping the pot of discussion boiling and settling nothing; Snowden playing the strong silent financier, sternly saying "No" to all and sundry (especially his Labour colleagues), and thereby building up a tremendous reputation for himself as the true-blue bulldog type.

No wonder they could spare little time for the old familiar domestic problems, such as the actual privations of the unemployed and their dependants. A cut of 10 per cent in the pay of those already on the borderline of starvation would hardly penetrate their understanding as the one staggered along under the weight of the cares of the world and the other contemplated his budget of a thousand millions. For them, the tenure of office of a Labour Government was a game of bluff, and in the end their bluff was called. Curiously enough the callers gave them their money back and agreed to start a new game. It was

thus that the Labour Government gave place to the National Government.

What on earth possessed the Tories to fall in with the idea of a "National Government" passes comprehension. The tremendous wave of opinion which turned the Labour Government out would have turned a Tory Government in. But the incredible thing happened; a House of Commons, overwhelmingly Tory in complexion, found itself saddled with a heterogeneous Cabinet headed by an ex-Labour Prime Minister. This pie-bald political nag has still to resolve itself into something recognisable by the electorate.

To save their faces Baldwin, Chamberlain and other Tories must still maintain the necessity for a "National" government. Undoubtedly, a bargain of some sort was struck before the election of 1931, indeed before the fall of the Labour Government. But after the election those who bargained for the Tories must have kicked themselves as they are now being kicked by their followers.

One curious result of the intrigue was that the meek and unhonoured Clifford Allen, writer in obscure journals, socialist debater and pamphleteer, became Lord Allen of Hurtwood, with a voice in the counsels of the hereditarily great, and a pen at the service of his benefactors.

In the House of Commons in September, 1931, father tried to show that the crisis in the finances of the country had been brought about by the financial policy of the great bankers in lending huge sums of

money to Germany and Austria—both of whom were defaulting. He failed because his hearers were obsessed by the idea of economy. "Cuts" were the order of the day. Unemployment pay, teachers' salaries, judges' salaries, police pay, firemen's pay, sailors' pay, soldiers' pay, and even the pay of Cabinet Ministers and members of Parliament all had to be cut down so that the whole world might know that England, the home of the proud and free, was doing the bidding of cosmopolitan bankers and financiers.

I think George Lansbury was one of the few patriots of those days of crisis. He stood up in the House of Commons, and, amid jeers and unmannerly interruptions from the overloaded government benches, ridiculed the idea that England could not pay her way.

"It has been said that there has been no interference with the affairs of our country, that the bankers, international and national, have only done what any lenders would be expected to do—they wanted to make sure that they would get their money back. That is their business. I should have no objection to that if they were dealing with semi-bankrupts, but I have an objection to it when applied to this country.

"The fact is, we have been told again and again that if we want to save the pound, no matter how we balance our Budget, whether we make a cut or impose taxation, unless we cut unemployment benefit the pound would go "swop". I went home one

night thinking over these things, and remembered something that Tennyson had written when a certain monarch interfered with the domestic affairs of this country:

As long as we remain, we must speak free,  
 Tho' all the storm of Europe on us break,  
 No little paltry State are we,  
 But the one voice in Europe; we must speak;  
 That if to-night our greatness were struck dead  
 There might be left some record of the things we said.  
 If you be fearful, then must we be bold,  
 Our Britain cannot salve a tyrant o'er,  
 Better the waste Atlantic roll'd  
 On her and us and ours for evermore.  
 What! have we fought for Freedom from our prime,  
 At last to dodge and palter with a public crime?  
 Shall we fear them? our own we never fear'd.  
 From our first Charles by force we wrung our claims,  
 Prick'd by the Papal spur, we rear'd.  
 We flung the burthen of the second James.  
 Tho' niggard throats of money-lords may bawl,  
 What England was, shall her true sons forget?  
 We are not money-lenders all,  
 But some love England and her honour yet.  
 And these in our Thermopylæ shall stand,  
 And hold against the world this honour of the land.

Later on he says:

We have been told that we ran away, that we gave up.<sup>1</sup>  
 The people who ran away are those who sit over there  
 (pointing to MacDonald and Snowden). They have capitulated to the moneylenders.

<sup>1</sup> Father often said: "They say I ran away! What did I run away from?—£2,000 a year, and a job I liked very much!"



Again in the same debate he took the opportunity of quoting two verses from the socialist song "England Arise". He did this for the special benefit of MacDonald and Snowden both of whom had sung them lustily at many Socialist meetings and conferences.

Over your face, a web of lies is woven,  
Laws that are falsehoods pin you to the ground.  
Labour is mocked, its just reward is stolen,  
On its bent back sits idleness enthroned.  
From each wretched slum, let the loud cry come,  
Arise, oh England for the day is here!  
Forth then ye heroes, patriots and lovers,  
Comrades of danger, poverty and scorn,  
Mighty in faith of freedom, your great mother,  
Giants refreshed in joy's new rising morn;  
Come and swell the song, silent now so long,  
"England is risen and the day is here!"

No wonder the newspapers next day said that MacDonald was obviously uneasy throughout the debate. Every word must have been a stab in the place where his heart used to be.

Characteristically enough, father wound up with a confession of faith:

There are two phases of life. There are the givers and the takers. For my sins, I have been on the side of those who believe that the law of life, for individuals and for States, is not what they get, but what they give, and the test of Christianity and of British civilisation is, "Can you apply, and will you apply, the principle of brotherhood

alike?" If you believe in the true doctrine of the Founder of our faith, then you must reject this Bill (the National Economy Bill) you must throw it out. Rich and powerful as we are, we must say, "If there is a crisis, and if there is a need, then all of us will come down together and share whatever there is to share with one another".

Father has only seen the King three times. I do not know what impression he made on the King, but I do know that the King made a very good impression on him. As father said to me once, "The King was kindness itself and did most of the talking". I think the talk was about the Haig Statue, and father was very well aware that the official action of his department might not be along the lines that His Majesty desired. So father, like Brer Rabbit "lay low and said nuffin". I believe the King was in favour of the statue bearing some sort of resemblance to the subject, a philistinian predilection not at all in line with the ideas of the ultra-modern school.

When father handed in his seals of office, the royal attitude was exceedingly proper. It was to the effect that father's position was quite understood, that one would hardly have expected one of father's age to change his opinions, and that his refusal to carry on in the National Government was only to be expected.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### "ONLY AN INCIDENT"

EARLY in December, 1933, father packed his bag and proceeded to the Eastern Counties. He had undertaken an arduous week-end of meetings, both open-air and indoor. Farmers and farm labourers were alike entitled to hear the Labour Party programme and the socialist creed, and the meetings were worth while whether attended by dozens or thousands.

Having arrived at Gainsborough and opened a bazaar, he was on his way to a public meeting when he slipped and fell. He tried to rise, but a broken thigh prevented him; so he did the next best thing; he waved his hand to the crowd and shouted, "Don't bother about me, carry on: this is only an incident."

So he spent Christmas and New Year's day in the Manor House Hospital, London. One need not enquire why he is in a hospital instead of a nursing home. He is amongst his own people. His room is just large enough to admit his bed; there are no chairs, so visitors have to stand, wedged between the bed and the wall. The hospital is full of workmen, mechanics and labourers, who have been injured in industrial accidents of various kinds.

If father ever gets to heaven you will have to look for him among “the common people”. Perhaps you will not have far to look.

Since his arrival, rich and poor have sent their tributes of fruit and flowers. Every offering moved him deeply. But there was not space enough for a hundredth of them in his room; nor could he consume one-tenth of the fruit in a month. So the other wards of the hospital have been enriched day by day by these offerings.

I think he feels deeply the enforced inactivity which this unkind stroke of fate has entailed. For, to a man of seventy-four, six months or a year is like six years to a boy or girl. He has a lot to do and a relatively short time in which to do it. Truly, his accident is “only an incident” in the onward march of the people. But he wants to be with them on the march.

And he will be. Nothing but complete annihilation could prevent it. He will rise up from his sick-bed with renewed vigour and lead his hosts to the promised land. His body is still young, his eyes bright, his voice deep and resonant, his courage what it always has been. Those who know him say that his accident will “put five years on his life”.

But whether he will lead the movement, or march in the ranks is immaterial to him. Yet I would say a word to those who, though they applaud him as Leader of the Opposition, do so in order to belittle him as a possible leader of a government. He will lead the movement in the one capacity or the other

so long as he carries in his heart the love, the trust, and the hopes of the people. No one in the Labour Party could or would prevent it.

He is not brilliantly clever, he is no dialectician. The world is sick of brilliant scoundrels; governments are constantly made and broken by unprincipled dialecticians. Trade and industry flourish or wilt irrespective of the cleverness or stupidity of politicians. The world's best hopes depend upon the pure in heart.

The essentials for a leader of Labour are courage, strength, integrity, and a vision clear enough to see the end of the road as well as the rocks and pitfalls on the way.

It may not be possible to establish Socialism within the next few years, but one thing is certain and should be written in words of fire: No Labour Government will shirk the issue which transcends all other issues—whether the hungry shall be fed and the naked clothed. If there is any wisdom left in the present régime the cost of this piece of practical christianity will be met gladly.

No words could more aptly summarise father's life and character than Robert Browning's:

One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would  
triumph,  
Held, we fall to rise,  
Are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake.